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Discerning a Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project was to discern a vocational theology of marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ in Smyrna, Tennessee. Through a group discernment process, the participants studied Genesis 1-3 and 2 Corinthians 5 as a basis for understanding God's design for marriage at creation, the effects of sin on the vocational aspect of the marriage relationship, and the call of Christ for husbands and wives to participate in the resurrection life through the ministry of reconciliation. At the end of the discernment process, the participants articulated a theology statement for the church that examined our current context in light of scripture and recognized God's call for husbands and wives as joint participants in the kingdom of God. This theology statement can now be positioned as a filter and lens for viewing current and future ministry structures and practices.

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Council of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

Dean of the Graduate School

Date

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Discerning a Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Ministry

By

Daniel F. Camp

February 4, 2011

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It is with a grateful heart that I dedicate this project thesis:

To my beautiful, wonderful wife Lisa—I would not fully understand God’s love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, goodness, and kindness apart from my relationship with Lisa. I love you.

My wonderful children, Chloe, Macie, and Holden, who have helped me to better understand God as my Father, and who have brought me unbelievable joy. I pray constantly that, if it is my children’s calling, God is even now preparing two young men and one young lady to be their future mates.

My parents Jim and Edith Camp who raised me to know and love the Lord—I long to be at home some day with my earthly father in the arms of our Heavenly Father.

The ministers and elders at the Smyrna Church of Christ, who have a passion for the Kingdom of God and have encouraged my work in marriage ministry.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This project thesis addresses the need for a vocational theology of marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ,¹ located in Smyrna, Tennessee. The eldership at Smyrna acknowledges the need for a vocational theology of marriage as a first step toward a well-formed overall theology and praxis of marriage within the congregation. The first chapter of this thesis gives an overview of the history of marriage theology and practice at Smyrna, the reasons for a renewed pursuit of marriage as kingdom vocation, and some specific barriers to that pursuit. Chapter 1 also describes the statement of the problem, statement of purpose, basic assumptions, definitions, delimitations, and limitations that guided this project. Chapter 2 outlines a theological foundation for a vocational theology of marriage as participation in the ministry of reconciliation. Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in assembling a team to discern a vocational theology of marriage and details for each session of the intervention. In the fourth chapter, the results of the intervention are explained and evaluated. The final chapter considers the implications of this project for Smyrna.

Title of the Project

¹ Hereinafter referred to as Smyrna.

The title of this project thesis is “A Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ.” Although “vocational” in a theological sense is not part of the normal vernacular for the Smyrna eldership, the concept of pervasive, kingdom-centered living is strongly ingrained in their beliefs and teachings.

Ministry Context

The Smyrna congregation was established in the latter half of the 1800s by the Levi White family upon their return to Smyrna, Tennessee, after hearing Alexander Campbell preach in West Tennessee.² Smyrna has a rather typical formation and early history similar to most Restoration Movement Churches of Christ in the Bible-belt area of the southeastern United States. Meaningful chapters in Smyrna’s history were marked by the establishment of the congregation, donation of land for the church to meet, the completion of the first building, and steady growth and multiple additional building projects over the next several decades.

Smyrna’s Inherited Theology of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage

For most of her history, Smyrna abided by an inherited theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.³ This theological thrust followed the widespread Church of

² “Our History,” www.smyrnachurchofchrist.org/Visitors/OurHistory.aspx (accessed June 30, 2010). The historical records for Smyrna are “somewhat scant,” but specific key events that led to the formation of the congregation are documented. Source material for the online article includes Walter King Hoover, *Smyrna: The Church, The Town* (Nashville: McQuiddy Publishing Co., 1968). Additional material particular to the Smyrna congregation was also provided by McGarvey Ice, researcher for the Disciples of Christ Historical Society.

³ By “inherited theology,” I am referring to a theological viewpoint that was widespread and commonly held during the Restoration Movement, and handed down from generation to generation with little or no change. Eventually, the theological viewpoint of an inherited theology is accepted based on tradition and comfortable familiarity rather than a careful, ongoing discernment of the contemporary

Christ tradition that is largely based on Matthew 19. The essential construct of this theology is that divorce is prohibited except for sexual infidelity. The spouse who cheated can never remarry, but the innocent spouse is free to remarry at his or her discretion. It is also permissible for the couple to reconcile, but the partner who did not commit physical sexual infidelity holds all the power in determining whether reconciliation will occur. Remarriage by the partner who was unfaithful is seen as living in a state of perpetual adultery. At times, those who have remarried have even been encouraged to divorce a second time in order to “leave a sinful lifestyle” and to be ready in case there is ever a chance they can reconcile with their first spouse.⁴

A common phrase within this marriage theology is “in God’s eyes.” This phrase implies that the first marriage exists as a legitimate union before God and any subsequent marriage is not recognized by God as a spiritually lawful or binding covenant relationship. For many who have experienced divorce, particularly if no physical infidelity was involved, this theological orientation left them playing a waiting game, with each party in the broken marriage trying to remain single until the other party married again and could be labeled as the adulterer against their previous marriage relationship.

culture through the lens of Scripture. This is not an indictment against the studies, beliefs, or practices of those who have held to and perpetuated an “inherited theology,” but a clarification of how the traditional viewpoint became ingrained into the identity of the congregation. It is evident that well-meaning men and women have passed on this inherited theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage out of a sincere desire to safeguard the sanctity of marriage as a Christian institution.

⁴ Based on a harsh, judgmental, legalistic reading of this text, I have personally observed church leaders counsel couples in second or later marriages to divorce. If the second union had produced offspring, the counsel was for the couple to remain married but either abstain from sexual relations or live in separate homes if they could not control their sexual desires in the same household. In those church leaders’ thinking, this counsel allowed children of a second union to have both parents present in their lives, thus fulfilling the parents’ spiritual obligations while still keeping the husband and wife from committing adultery by consummating their union.

This marriage theology has roots all the way back to the beginnings of the Restoration Movement (and likely far prior to that). As early as 1834, Alexander Campbell, one of the founders of the movement, writing in the *Millennial Harbinger*, held to “whoredom” as the only legitimate reason for ending a marriage. However, based on 1 Corinthians 7, Campbell did believe that the sin of divorce would be forgiven if the divorce was obtained prior to the person’s becoming a Christian, thus allowing a legitimate, post-conversion second marriage.⁵

Several decades later, David Lipscomb and E. G. Sewell continued in this theological line of reasoning although they did not share Campbell’s belief that people could remarry if they became Christians after divorcing the first spouse. In fact, they went to the opposite extreme from Campbell and said a divorced person’s conversion was all the more reason for that person to remain single.⁶ Lipscomb said second and later marriages “ought not be called marriage,”⁷ that a person’s first spouse is the only spouse “in the sight of God,”⁸ and that a person who divorces and remarries multiple times “has done too much marrying and separating to ever be saved.”⁹

In the 1975 lectureship at Freed-Hardeman College, describing the requisites for “true marriage,” Guy N. Woods said that the “one already married, *in God’s sight*”

⁵ Alexander Campbell, *The Millennial Harbinger*. Feb 34:70 (1834): 70-73. At the end of his discourse, Campbell notes that Walter Scott, another prominent figure in the Restoration Movement, who was visiting with Campbell at the time of his writing, concurred with Campbell’s viewpoint on this matter.

⁶ M. C. Kurfees, ed., *Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1974), 434. Although the question was specifically answered by Sewell, it was presumably with Lipscomb’s agreement, as the question was addressed to both.

⁷ J. W. Shepherd, ed. *Queries and Answers by David Lipscomb, editor of the Gospel Advocate* (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Co., 1910), 282.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 281.

(emphasis his) could not contract another marriage.¹⁰ Campbell, Scott, Lipscomb, Sewell, and Woods were leaders within the Restoration Movement whose views on marriage, divorce, and remarriage influenced Smyrna and other congregations so deeply that their doctrine became the standardized interpretation of Matthew 19. Thus, for over one hundred fifty years, this theology was vigorously put forth and defended with little variation, and generally accepted without question.

Although never vocalized as such, the weight of the inherited tradition and the resulting practice clearly treated a divorced person as a “second-class Christian.” At many churches, divorced persons were not allowed to teach, serve in the worship service, or be involved in any official capacity of the church’s life. In essence, divorced people were relegated to sitting on the pew and dropping money into the collection plate. The Smyrna congregation followed a similar practice until the mid 1990s.

The Theological View of Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage: 1994 to Present

In 1994, it was evident to Smyrna’s eldership that the church’s practice of coping with divorce and remarriage was conflicting with the reality of the congregation and the culture surrounding them. Divorced individuals brought significant ministry gifts, but they resented the closed doors that prevented them from serving. Even the elders were dealing with the issue on a personal level, as some of their own children experienced divorce. Most significantly, the attitude and treatment of divorced persons that was aligned with the inherited theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage seemed to ignore grace, mercy, forgiveness, and a general Christ-centric character.

¹⁰ Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers: Open Forum, Freed-Hardeman College Lectures* (Nashville: Williams, 1976), 299.

In light of these developments, the eldership made the choice to conduct an in-depth study of the biblical texts regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage. A year-long study focused on all the passages of Scripture dealing with marriage, divorce, and remarriage, implications of the original language behind each passage, original contextual circumstances that prompted the writing of each passage, and contemporary application. In addition to their own personal and corporate study, the eldership brought in prominent ministers, church leaders, and academics, some who supported the inherited theology and tradition, and some who opposed it. The study yielded a new perspective on biblical mandates regarding marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and this new understanding led to new responses to families within the congregation and within the larger community.

Key findings of the year-long study were the affirmation that God hates divorce, but God does not hate divorced people. If God hates a first divorce, then he would also hate subsequent divorces, and if the breaking of the first covenant was wrong, then so too would be the breaking of a later covenant with a new spouse. Matthew 19 and other scriptures on marriage, divorce, and remarriage were not rationalized away, but rather put into a context of contemporary relevance and discernment that had been previously minimized or ignored altogether.¹¹

The elders decided to accept couples where they currently were, encourage them to honor the marriage covenant of which they were presently a part, and to put the judgment of each individual and couple back into God's hands. The conclusion to the study was presented to the congregation in a discussion-style format in the adult Bible

¹¹ See Rubel Shelly, *Divorce and Remarriage: A Redemptive Theology* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2007). Shelly's exegeses and conclusions regarding divorce and remarriage presented in this book are very much in line with the conclusions reached by the Smyrna eldership in 1994.

school classes over a thirteen-week period. This class was difficult for many long time members. What they always held to as scriptural truth was challenged in a significant way. The eldership called on the congregation to exhibit courage in going through this study, knowing there would be significant resistance to challenging the inherited theology with which most were familiar and comfortable.¹² After bringing their study into dialogue with the congregation, the eldership reexamined the issue and reaffirmed their conclusions.

After the discussion in the Bible classes, about thirty to forty of Smyrna's members left as a result of the direction the church was taking. Some left because they felt the eldership had gone too far and strayed from biblical direction, and some left because they felt the eldership did not go far enough in accepting or admonishing subsequent marriages. A few nearby congregations labeled Smyrna as "the church that supports and accepts divorce." Although the Smyrna congregation regretted the fallout, the study gave the eldership biblical insight and a practical strategy for responding to divorced persons.¹³

In spite of the moves to properly discern the times and put the biblical message into a living context with the church community, marriage problems persisted at Smyrna. The eldership had a better grasp of how to respond to divorce, but they still lacked a

¹² Interview with James Watson, June 29, 2010. James is currently an elder at Smyrna, although he was not an elder during the discussions in 1994. James' father was an elder at Smyrna for many years, but passed away several years prior to the discussions in 1994. You can still hear in James' voice the spiritual struggle this presented in reevaluating a position he had been taught and held on to for his entire life.

¹³ Interview with Robert Mullins, June 29, 2010. Robert has served as an elder for the Smyrna congregation for almost thirty years. As an elder at the time, Robert was deeply involved in the study, its presentation to the congregation, and navigation of the aftermath of the study. As a member of the Smyrna congregation since the 1950's and as a congregational historian, Robert was very helpful in pin-pointing significant movements in how the inherited theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage played out at Smyrna.

strategy and theological rationale for promoting strong marriages. In the fifteen years following, many marriages flourished, but many others struggled, and some failed. So, although the Smyrna congregation had become more culturally relevant and grace-oriented, she still suffered from a reactive church culture that affirmed the value of healthy marriages, but struggled to incorporate those values into the practiced ecclesiology of the congregation.

The Move Toward a Proactive Theology of Marriage: 2008

In the spring of 2008, the eldership again became keenly aware and sensitive to the state of marriage at Smyrna. More than a decade after the year-long study, circumstances arose that led the eldership to seek a better direction for building up and encouraging marriages within the congregation. The catalyst that brought about this new drive was the crushing reality that a number of marriages, several of which involved higher profile members, were in danger of coming apart. The elders sent out an e-mail to the ministers, calling a special meeting to seek solutions.¹⁴ This email revealed the current reaction-based mindset, but also revealed an intrinsic knowledge that something had to change.

In a meeting on April 14, 2008, Smyrna started on a path to proactive marriage-building ministry. With marriage retreats, classes, and other family-based ministries happening, steps had already been initiated, but now there was a perceived urgency. At first, there was still a knee-jerk, reactive nature at the meeting. The initial call was to bring in an expert on marriage, or to have a series of lessons from the pulpit, or to have a

¹⁴ See Appendix A.

special class to address the immediate problems. However, as the meeting progressed, the mood shifted from reactive urgency to a determined proactivity. Ideas emerged to move the congregation toward developing healthy marriages on an ongoing basis rather than merely responding to immediate marital crises.

Along with a proposal for several initiatives,¹⁵ in this meeting, I presented the elders with the idea of developing a theology of marriage for the congregation.¹⁶ Although its final form did not materialize for several weeks, this theology was to be distinct from the church's earlier theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage in a number of ways. First, we recognized the need to be proactive rather than reactive. How would this theology inform the church's role in teaching and practicing healthy marriage covenants rather than outline the church's response to marriages that have already failed? Second, it was to be produced in a clear, concise written form. The previous study of marriage, divorce, and remarriage informed the current practice of acceptance and fellowship, but was not presented in a written form available to the congregation. Third, there would need to be a plan to keep the theology in front of the church for it to take root and be formative. This theology was not intended to be assumed, or understood, or somehow "picked up," but rather it was intended to be clearly stated, both to current members and to those who place membership with the Smyrna congregation.¹⁷

As the April 14th conversation developed, the eldership recognized several challenges for building strong marriages. The traditional nuclear family of husband, wife,

¹⁵ See Appendix B.

¹⁶ See Appendix C.

¹⁷ Although based on solid, biblical principles regarding marriage, the theology of marriage initially produced was deficient in delineating marriage as kingdom vocation, thus leading to the intervention outlined in chapter 3 of this project thesis.

and their shared offspring was no longer nearly as predominant as it once was. The population of blended families was rapidly growing and could no longer be an overlooked minority. Along with blended families, the congregation was also experiencing a rise in bi-racial marriages, and also in families from various ethnic groups that bring with them customs and traditions foreign to our southern-American culture. These families were introducing societal and cultural differences regarding marriage and family that we previously had not considered. We could no longer assume a “one size fits all” definition of what marriage and a family should look like.¹⁸

Statement of the Problem

In light of the ministry context outlined above, there was a need for a vocational theology of marriage. The eldership desired initiatives to strengthen and protect marriages at Smyrna, and this theology served as a primary step in moving forward in reclaiming fundamentally healthy, Christ-centered marriages as a significant part of the DNA of a healthy congregational ecclesiology.

There are notable deficiencies arising within the church family because we lacked a well-defined vocational theology of marriage. First, members mimic society’s distortions. While it is common in Bible classes and sermons to criticize the secular culture¹⁹ for championing sexual promiscuity and deviance, and compromising and

¹⁸ In *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 12ff, Rodney Clapp challenges the notion that there has ever been a picture of a Christian family “drawn directly and without mediation from the Bible.” Many at Smyrna, including the ministry leadership team of elders and staff ministers, would still hold on to a principles-based “biblical ideal” for family, but would concur with Clapp and recognize that the ideal is much more of a myth than a reality.

¹⁹ “Culture” is a fluid term that is always defined by context. By “secular culture,” I am referring to influences originating from outside the realm of scripture, the Smyrna congregation and her ministries

belittling the marriage covenant relationship, the secular culture has still permeated the church. The entertainment industry, the pornography industry, and the media have a profound effect on marital views and practices within the congregation. Acceptable norms within the church were (and still are) becoming defined by outside sources as often as they are by Scripture. These changing norms include views on the permanency of marriage and views on appropriate conduct for pre-marital relationships,²⁰ homosexuality,²¹ what constitutes infidelity,²² and challenges from technology,²³ among others.

and practices, or the influence of generally accepted orthodox Christianity. Secular culture emanates a worldview that is self-centric rather than Christ-centric.

²⁰ The Barna Research Group conducted surveys in 2000 and 2008. The surveys revealed that Christians had a similar or slightly higher divorce rate when compared to those who do not profess Christianity. The 2000 survey suggested that “the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages.” Although the 2008 survey showed a decline in divorce, it was due to an increase in cohabitation, even among those professing Christianity. The 2008 survey also revealed that young adults want their initial marriage to last, but are much less inclined to believe it will. “There is also evidence that many young people are moving toward embracing the idea of serial marriage, in which a person gets married two or three times, seeking a different partner for each phase of their adult life.” Information for the 2000 survey from B. A. Robinson, “Divorce and Remarriage: U.S. Divorce Rates for Various Faith Groups, Age Groups, and Geographic Areas.” Accessed at www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm (accessed May 24, 2007). Robinson is Quoting George Barna’s comments on the results of a 1999 Barna Research Group Poll of 3,854 people, covering 48 states, released on 21 December 1999. Information for the 2008 survey taken from the online article “New Marriage and Divorce Statistics Released,” www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=295 (accessed May 24, 2007).

The CDC website (www.cdc.gov) also provides valuable information in tracking statistical trends on marriage, divorce, and cohabitation.

²¹ Personal experience in teaching classes at Smyrna reveals a growing divide within the congregation on addressing the issue of homosexuality. See Dan Kimbal’s book, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 136-161 for more information on the generational divergence over homosexuality happening within many churches, including Smyrna.

²² There is still a wide array of opinions within the Smyrna congregation on what defines infidelity. The specific issue is what constitutes the breaking of the marriage covenant. Some hold to only sexual intercourse with someone outside the marriage, while others cite emotional infidelity as grounds for divorce. (See Gary and Mona Shriver’s *Unfaithful* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009) for more on emotional infidelity.) Others argue physical, emotional, or sexual abuse by a spouse as grounds for divorce.

²³ The obvious dangers associated with technology are present at Smyrna. Online pornography and other inappropriate content are destroying marriages. Social networking sights such as Facebook are also

Second, members are ashamed when they face inevitable marriage crises. In addition to outside pressures on Smyrna's marriages from the secular culture, there are also internal pressures on marriage originating from the practiced church culture.²⁴ Within the Smyrna congregation, there is pressure for couples to put on the "church face." The "church face" is the shame culture that exists within the congregation as a part of the church culture. Couples feel they must put up a façade in order to appear as if everything is wonderful within their marriage and family. As couples see other couples who appear to have their lives in perfect order, they feel pressured to also "have it all together." Thus, we often exist as a congregation of couples with seemingly perfect marriages and families who always enthusiastically smile and vigorously say "Fine" when asked how things are. The "church face" façade protected couples from the perceived shame of being imperfect, and the façade is perpetuated for many couples until it is too late to save the marriage.

From 2008 to 2010, two testing instruments have been administered to a number of different couples at Smyrna. The results of these instruments have reinforced the existence of a "church face" shame culture among marriage relationships within the congregation. First, the PREPARE/ENRICH marital survey was administered to thirty-

beginning to wreck havoc. I have personally witnessed individuals in strained marriages reconnect with former relationship interests in inappropriate ways, via online communication. One of the greatest dangers of technology is the secrecy that can be maintained in what is viewed and in interpersonal communications. The marriage-destroying effects of online pornography are well documented. Because online social networking is still a relatively new innovation, there is not extensive data on its effect on marriage. "Divorce Lawyers: Facebook tops in online evidence," an Associated Press report by Leanne Italie that highlights the rise in divorce caused by technology can be found at news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20100628/ap_on_hi_te/us_fea_lifestyles_facebook_divorce.

²⁴ "Church culture" refers to those things that emanate from the life of the congregation and define the character and behavior of the congregation. Those things are not always scripturally-derived or Christ-centric. In fact, the character of church culture is often socially derived or borrowed from secular culture (see footnote 19) and integrated into the standard practices and life of the church. "Church culture" becomes the stigmata of acceptable behaviors within a specific community of faith.

two couples. The thirty-two couples represented each stage of life from newlywed couples to post-retirement couples, as well as several blended families, a bi-racial couple, and a Hispanic couple. More than three-fourths of the couples who took the PREPARE/ENRICH assessment would be considered active or very active in the life of the congregation. All of the couples assessed give a surface perception that reflects a loving, committed marriage relationship. In spite of the assessed couples' outward persona, the results of the assessment showed one-third of the couples were assessed as "Conflicted" or "Devitalized."²⁵

Another assessment instrument, the Relationship Health Snapshot,²⁶ was given to seventy-eight married individuals. While PREPARE/ENRICH assesses the couple and presents a combined report, the Relationship Health Snapshot assesses each individual spouse's view of his or her marriage. While this assessment revealed that approximately one-fourth of the couples agreed their marriage was distressed, the alarming result was the divide between a husband's or wife's perception of his or her marriage when compared to the spouse's perception. In approximately one in ten marriages, at least one

²⁵ PREPARE/ENRICH assesses couples as Vitalized, Harmonious, Conventional, Conflicted, or Devitalized. Based on measures of nine categories, couples that are Conflicted are described as disagreeing in many areas of their relationship, and couples that are Devitalized are described as disagreeing on most areas of their relationship. PREPARE/ENRICH does not make predictions of marital success or failure.

²⁶ Dr. Phillip C. McGraw, *Relationship Rescue* (New York: Hyperion Press, 2001), 28-31. The "Relationship Health Snapshot" survey was originally accessed at www.redmondfamily.com/Family%20Resources/Useful%20Tips/Marriage. There was nothing indicating original authorship of the survey, but further research showed it to be from the source cited above. While I am more inclined to discount Dr. Phil as a media personality than a reputable source, with adaptation this survey did prove a useful tool, though not nearly as comprehensive as PREPARE/ENRICH. Adaptation of the assessment included adding questions in the areas of family (in-law relationships, child-rearing, etc.) and finances. The defining ranges for the assessment results at the end of the instrument were adjusted to accommodate the addition of twelve questions. Adjustments were made to maintain the range of ranking levels according to percentage of total questions asked.

spouse believed the couple was already living an emotional divorce or in eminent danger of marital failure, but the other spouse felt things were significantly better.

While assessments like PREPARE/ENRICH and the Relationship Health Snapshot are not always accurate predictors of marital success or failure, they do highlight the discrepancy between what a couple presents before the church family and what they perceive themselves to truly be experiencing within their marriages. Breaking through the “church face” culture is an immensely difficult task. It requires couples to admit weakness and imperfection. In a decades-old tradition of veiled confessions, when someone actually did come forward and ask for the prayers of the church, it was especially difficult to be transparent and authentic. Most who grew up within conservative Churches of Christ grew up only hearing someone confess that he or she “has sin in their life.” While we do not want to trade the “church face” shame culture for a culture of airing our dirty laundry for all to see, we are keenly aware that it is tough to move forward if vague references to sin are all anyone ever hears, particularly if the sinful behavior directly impacts the person’s marriage.²⁷

Third, couples are confused about how to be involved in the congregation in healthy ways. Smyrna’s current church culture is detrimental to a vocational theology of marriage because of the current ministry structure. When a couple joins the Smyrna congregation, husband and wife are introduced to an organized pathway into congregational involvement. New families sit down with someone who provides them with a list of ministries the congregation offers, and asks the couple where they would

²⁷ To some extent this problem is already resolving itself, as the younger generations, primarily Gen Xer’s (born 1963 to 1983) and Millennials (born 1983 to 2003), seem to hunger for openness and authenticity much more than their predecessors. Still, the power of the tradition of the shame culture that continues to exist has not allowed this shift to fully take hold yet.

like to become active. There is a men's track and a women's track for involvement. Because of the traditional limitations on women's role within our fellowship, these tracks are often very different in what is and is not offered. So, the men's sheet is filled with ways to be involved in the public worship assembly, building maintenance and handyman-type activities, and a host of other things typically reserved for men. The women's involvement encompasses preparing food for the infirmed or bereaved, sending cards, sewing, or other domestic skills. The two ministry paths might cross over in a limited number of arenas such as chaperoning youth events, or possibly teaching a youth or children's class, but the language of the new members' orientation and involvement meeting does not convey couple's ministry. Areas of couple's ministry are the exception rather than the norm.

Smyrna's full church calendar can also be harmful to strong marriages. Members tend to measure a person's worth and commitment by how busy he or she is. It is in this misguided belief that the (often times) marriage-devouring separate ministry tracks mentioned above feeds and thrives. When an overloaded church calendar is coupled with a family full of sports calendars, school calendars, work calendars, and social calendars, husbands and wives can find themselves constantly running in different directions.

The bane of the church calendar is the false impression that participation in church activities is the same as participation in the kingdom of God, and to skip a church event is equal to rebellion against what God desires for one's marriage and family. Ironically, most church calendars are so age segregated for children and gender segregated for adults that the feeling is unjustified, as church activities often cause division in marriages and families rather than unity. The church calendar can easily create

a stigma of guilt for “not being committed to God” even as it unknowingly harms a marriage and/or family.²⁸

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this project was to guide a discernment team to develop a vocational theology of marriage. The process used is described in detail in chapter 3. The discernment team was intended to represent the diversity of life situations present in the Smyrna congregation as a means of infusing a multi-faceted understanding into the discussion. While the vocational theology of marriage should be founded in scripture and orthodox Christianity, it should also be contextually relevant for the Smyrna congregation. This theological reflection should be formative in leading married couples at Smyrna into a more fully formed life in God.

Basic Assumptions

Two basic assumptions informed each phase of this project. First, this paper deals only with heterosexual marriage. This assumption is based on the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2, in which God created them male and female (1:27), and all textual interpretations and intervention session discussions focused only on male/female unions.²⁹

²⁸ This is an area that is personally difficult. Because our society believes that busyness equals worth, there is a sense from many ministers that if we do not produce a fully loaded calendar, the congregation will question our worth to the church as paid staff. It is difficult to lead people into seeing, let alone experiencing, a better way when that way is so counter-cultural. It is easier for most ministers to perpetuate the marriage-killing busyness than it is to take on the challenge of leading the congregation into a means to deeper, better relationships.

²⁹ Homosexuality, and particularly whether or not homosexuals should have a legal right to marry, is currently receiving a large amount of mainstream media coverage. As state and federal laws continue to shape American society, the church will be forced to address this issue theologically and socially. However, it is not within the scope of this project to do so.

Second, those asked to participate as a part of the discernment team have a high view of scripture, believing that the Bible is God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and it is eternally relevant to our current context. Because of their high view of scripture, the members of the discernment team also have a high view of marriage, regardless of their own past or present personal experiences, seeing marriage as the creation and gift of God.

Delimitations

This project is specifically for the Smyrna Church of Christ. The results of this project will be primarily applicable to married couples. Therefore, other categories related to marriage ministry (i.e.,—Bible class ministry, pre-marital counseling, curriculum evaluation, men's ministry, women's ministry, etc.) may be informed by the results, but those outgrowths were not the primary focus of this project.

This project was not intended to be dismissive to those who are single—whether by sacred choice, divorce, death, or any other means—or to their importance in the kingdom of God. Although it is also not within the scope of this project to discern a theology of dedicated, sacred singleness, a person devoted to sacred singleness was invited to participate in the discernment group for the purpose of utilizing his or her God-given gift of discernment and to also provide another unique perspective to the discernment team.

Limitations

This project sought to produce a communally discerned vocational theology of marriage based on marriage as participation in the ministry of reconciliation. This

vocational theology is more fully developed in chapter 2. It was beyond the scope of this project to articulate a fully-formed theology of marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Conclusion

Over the last few years, the Smyrna congregation has made many positive steps toward developing a strong theology of marriage. After replacing decades of inherited theology with a biblically-informed direction that is relevant to Smyrna's context, the eldership was ready to take the next step in establishing a strong ecclesiology of marriage. That next step was to discern a vocational theology of marriage that will permeate a multitude of other ministries, informing teachings and practices for the foreseeable future. Chapter 2 develops a theology of marriage as vocational participation in the ministry of reconciliation, and as a foundational avenue for couples at Smyrna to proactively view marriage as a kingdom-oriented life in God.

CHAPTER 2

A VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE AS PARTICIPATION IN THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

Chapter 1 illuminated the need for a vocational theology of marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ. This chapter will develop that theology. First, I will define what is meant by a vocational theology of marriage. Next, I will look at Genesis 1-2 and the vocational design of marriage at creation and how that informs our current understanding of vocational marriage. Then, I will move to Genesis 3 and look at how the vocational nature of marriage was fractured by the fall of humanity. After that, I will examine 2 Corinthians 5 and discuss the centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection to a renewed call for vocational marriage as a participation in the ministry of reconciliation. Finally, I will extrapolate a vocational call for husbands and wives within Smyrna's contemporary context.

Defining a Vocational Theology of Marriage

The primary vocational calling of all Christians is to love God and love one's neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40). How a person lives out this calling is contingent upon how the vocational call intersects with his or her station in life. Love for one's neighbor is the physical manifestation of his or her love for God. Since God does not speak audibly,

physically touch us, have bad breath or body odor, make us cry, do things to offend us, or otherwise engage us in a physical manner, it is easy to profess love for God. Yet our relationship with God is reflected by our interaction with our fellow humanity. As the image bearers of God, the way we interact with others who are also made in God's image reveals how fully conformed to the likeness of God we are becoming. "If anyone says 'I love God' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." (1 Jn. 4:20)

One's station in life becomes the medium through which the primary vocational call is lived out.³⁰ For some, it will be through singleness, for others it will be through marriage.³¹ Without a doubt, one's spouse is his or her closest, most intimate neighbor. Regardless of whether a person is initially compelled to marriage for carnal reasons, spiritual reasons, or some combination of the two, the vocational call of marriage is to love God as evidenced by love for one's spouse. Although the pursuit of love for God is the primary goal, it is inseparable from the pursuit of loving one's mate.

In order for marriage to truly be grasped as a vocational calling, two things must happen. First, we must come to the recognition that the purpose of marriage is not to make us happy in a superficial, self-centered, romanticized way, but rather to make us holy. As Gary Thomas says, "the real transforming work of marriage is the twenty-four-

³⁰ For a larger discussion on the Catholic understanding of marriage as a vocational calling, see Joseph Bolin, "What is Vocation? According to St. Thomas Aquinas," www.pathsoflove.com/articles/what-is-a-vocation-aquinas.html, and Kathleen Fischer Hart and Thomas N. Hart, "The Call to Holiness in Christian Marriage," *Spirituality Today*, Spring 1984, Vol. 36, No. 1, pp. 15-33. Accessed at www.pathsoflove.com/articles/holiness-in-marriage-hart.html.

³¹ 1 Corinthians 7 serves as a good model for understanding Christian vocation, both in a general sense and specifically in marriage. In this passage, Paul calls on the Corinthian Christians to recognize their current station in life as participation in God's Kingdom without disallowing them the freedom to change their circumstances, provided the change does not prevent them from living fully in Christ.

hours-a-day, seven-day-a-week commitment. This is the crucible that grinds and shapes us into the character of Jesus Christ.”³² Thomas goes on to explain that happiness and holiness are not mutually exclusive, but our culture’s emphasis on personal happiness over mutual holiness is devastating to an understanding of marriage as a joint vocational pursuit. Second, within the context of marriage, we must understand the concept of “one flesh” as more than a platitude or a reference only to the sexual nature of humanity. We must see “one flesh” as the communal, vocational nature of marriage in light of God’s call to love him and love one’s neighbor. Marriage is an entirely unique participation in the divine mystery of a holistic oneness between man, woman, and God that reflects Christ’s relationship with the church (Eph. 5:21-33). In vocational marriage, couples find a joint purpose in God that transcends a man and woman sharing a home and a bed. Marriage becomes the vessel in which couples grow in holiness together while participating in reconciling creation back to God through their life in Christ. It is the purposeful reorientation of life toward discipleship as it is specifically expressed in relationship with one’s mate. It is a visible, outward manifestation of covenant living, commitment, intimacy, grace, forgiveness, and love. It is the means by which a husband and wife truly become “salt and light” to the world around them.

In building a theological premise from this understanding of primary calling as a vocational directive in marriage, we must give attention to certain things. Theology is the place where faith intersects the human condition. One the one side, if we ignore the actual human condition, then the theological premise is an unobtainable illusion. One the other side, if we allow the human condition to dictate our theology, we empty God of his place as the loving, sovereign creator. The goal is a balance between striving for the ideal

³² Gary Thomas. *Sacred Marriage*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 22.

that God puts before us while engaging the reality of living in a fallen world. It is uncompromisingly living for God, but living in grace, mercy, humility, and forgiveness. It is in this balance that we embrace marriage as the vocational calling of God and as a call to discipleship.

The Vocational Design of Marriage at Creation

While we cannot fully know what existence in the Garden of Eden was like, Genesis 1-2 provides significant information about God's original design for the vocational nature of marriage. Genesis 1-2 shows that in the beginning God created humanity to be in relationship with him and with each other. It is interesting to note that the first human relationship was not brotherhood or sisterhood, but husband and wife. The primary calling of loving God and loving one's neighbor was first manifested in the marriage relationship.

At creation, God brings order out of chaos, and establishes a holistic existence that is fully relational. God's call for husband and wife is represented equally throughout all aspects of life.³³ In the beginning, there was no thought of human vocation, divine vocation, and personal vocation being separate functions.³⁴ All of life was life in God.³⁵

³³ R. R. Reno. *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 68-69. Reno notes that "[t]he divinely ordained project of tilling and keeping is not limited to its literal or political senses." The end goal is not work for the sake of physical productivity alone, but work as a means of shaping one's spiritual capacities. "The capacities that allow for attentive, concentrated, and disciplined work—capacities properly shaped by natural responsibilities for fields, families, factories and classrooms—find employment and perfection in the supernatural life of faith."

³⁴ See R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 72ff, for Stevens' exposition on each of the three categories of vocation listed, and how those categories function in a fallen world.

³⁵ In *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 218-219, Pope John Paul II notes that Christ, in answering the Pharisees' question about divorce and remarriage, refers to "the

Humanity was given special tasks that were unique to their nature: “be fruitful,” “fill the earth,” “subdue it,” and “rule” (1:28). Humanity was given dominion over the rest of creation and called on to act as co-regents, partnering with God³⁶ in caring for creation and participating with God in the creation act through procreation. In simplest terms, because we are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27), humanity’s vocation is to accurately reflect the Creator.³⁷

In order to fulfill the task of caring for creation, God created the woman to be a “helper” for the man, establishing their mutually dependent relationship.³⁸ With Adam,

beginning.” Thus the “certainty of [humanity’s] vocation” is witnessed by humanity reflecting the image of God.

³⁶ The term “partner with God” does not indicate an equal relationship in which God and humanity make collaborative decisions. Rather, God holds all the power in the relationship, but because of his loving nature, he invites his creation to participate in the goodness and righteousness of who he is and what he is doing. In essence, we are the tiny streams that trickle into a mighty flowing river whose course is set and whose source is unlimited and unyielding. By partnering with God, the man and woman chose to fully immerse themselves in God to the point that their will was fully entwined in his will.

³⁷ There is no attempt in this statement to reduce God to the dismal nature of the pagan gods, who are scarcely different from humanity—bitter, jealous, vengeful, engaging in lustful, deceitful pursuits. Our reflection of God is not a perfect reflection (and far less so after the fall), but only inasmuch as humanity can reflect the one true Divinity.

³⁸ The term “helper” is typically framed in a negatively subordinate context (See Martin Luther, *Luther’s Commentary on Genesis, A New Translation by J. Theodore Mueller, ThD., Ph.D., Volume 1: Chapters 1-21* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 34, in which Luther viewed Eve, even before the fall, as inferior to Adam, calling her “weaker in body and intellect.” He went on to say Eve was “equal to Adam so far as the divine image, that is righteousness, wisdom, and eternal salvation, is concerned.” But he concluded that thought with the barbed statement, “Still, she was only a woman.”) However, the indication in the Genesis text is “wholeness.” The Hebrew word *‘ezer*, translated “helper,” denotes much more than the English translation implies. As the footnote to Genesis 2:18 from the “NetBible,” <http://net.bible.org/verse.php?book= Gen&chapter=2&verse=18> (accessed July 22, 2010) notes: “In this context the word seems to express the idea of an ‘indispensable companion.’ The woman would supply what the man was lacking in the design of creation and logically it would follow that the man would supply what she was lacking, although that is not stated here.” The relationship of man and woman encompasses a “mutual help in all spheres of human existence” (See Claus Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 21. In *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, Translated by John J. Scullion S.J. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 232. Westermann also notes “the words ‘a helper fit for him’ refers neither to the sexual nature of woman (so Augustine) nor to the help which she could offer to the farmer. Any such limitation destroys the meaning of the passage. What is meant is the personal community of man and woman in the broadest sense—bodily and spiritual community, mutual help and understanding, joy and contentment in each other.”

there existed incompleteness: incompleteness in his ability to perform the vocation God put before him, in caring for the garden and in procreating. So, God created woman to complete man.³⁹ As for procreation, any thought of woman being an afterthought to address man's deficiency (his loneliness) is immediately dispelled by the sexual nature of humanity. Although the man was formed prior to the woman, the man was formed to be sexually compatible with the woman, revealing his need for the woman from the moment of his creation, just as the woman's sexual nature mandated her need for him.⁴⁰ Only together could they fulfill God's vocational directive of procreating.⁴¹

Thus, at creation humanity's existence was fully focused on God. There was a union of the spiritual and the physical and God was in their midst.⁴² It is this indescribable melding of the physical and spiritual that Paul calls a "profound mystery" (Eph. 5:32). The man and the woman reflect Christ's relationship with his bride, the church. It is a relationship punctuated by a holistic existence wrapped in the will of God

³⁹ Per Reno, 72-73, in creating woman, God gave man the completeness he lacked. This is not to say what God declared to be "very good" prior to the creation of woman was not indeed "very good." Creation is not "flawed," but physical, finite creation can only experience "life as unsettled by a restless anticipation of the future." We have "very good," but we long for "better still." However, because Reno can only read this text through the lens of hindsight, he sees "creation anticipation" in the text which may or may not have actually existed prior to the fall in Genesis 3.

⁴⁰ Genesis 2:15-18, if taken strictly as a chronological sequencing, misses the point in seeing the vocational meaning of the text (i.e.—If we read it, "God made the man for the task of caring for the garden. The task was too big for him to do alone, so God 'fixed' the problem by creating woman." The man's task to work and care for the garden was never intended for him alone. From the beginning, God's intent was for Adam and Eve to pursue their vocational identities together.

⁴¹ Per Pope John Paul II, In marriage, the husband and the wife engage in a "communion of persons" that was established at creation and is a reflection of the divine relationship shared by the Holy Trinity. This "communion of persons" is the theological underpinning of marriage as a spiritual, God-directed way of living. (*Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 161-165).

⁴² Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, Translation, Introduction, and Index by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 161-165. The woman is not created to serve the man sexually or physically, but rather to bring completeness. Only in union is the couple able to truly experience and reflect co-operatively that which they cannot know alone—the communal nature of God.

that gives the man and woman's life meaning and purpose. The beauty of the design of marriage as a joint vocational pursuit and the communion of man and woman with creation and with God at the center is reflected in Genesis 2:25, "the man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." In the beginning, as the image-bearer of God (1:26-27), humanity existed naked and unashamed,⁴³ residing in perfect creation, in the fullness of life focused on the will of God.

Vocational Marriage Compromised

⁴³ There is much debate on what "naked and not ashamed" means in this text. Some commentators see the primeval state of existence in the garden as nothing more than childlike innocence, believing Adam and Eve were not ashamed because they did not have the intellectual capacity or personal experience to be ashamed. They had not been taught that it is wrong to run around naked, so nudity bears no consequence. See Abraham Levene, *The Early Syrian Fathers on Genesis* (London: Taylor's Foreign Press, 1951), 77. Levene views shame as a means of repressing depravity, but believes God waited until after the fall to pour out shame on Adam and Eve. Franz Delitzsch, in *A New Commentary on Genesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001. Originally published in 1888), also links their lack of shame to a childlike state of existence. He goes on to say that "shame is a correlative of sin and guilt," therefore, "they have no reason to fear that the body would show shame within them" (p. 146).

The problem with this interpretation is that it connects the sexual nature of Adam and Eve to sin and shame, saying that shame only came when they gained enough knowledge that "their eyes were opened" (3:7) to their sexual identities and desires. Pope John Paul II argues that 2:25 presents "a true non-presence of shame" and "not just a lack of it or its insufficient development." He goes on to say, "[W]e can in no way maintain a 'primitivization' of its meaning. Thus, the text of Genesis 2:25 decidedly excludes not only the possibility of thinking about a 'lack of shame' or about shamelessness; it excludes even more the possibility of explaining it by analogy with positive human experiences, e.g. those of childhood or those of the life of so-called primitive peoples. Such analogies are not merely insufficient, but they can be entirely misleading." The Pope explains that not feeling shame does not describe a lack of anything, but rather a fullness of experience that transcends what we can experience in a fallen world (*Man and Woman He Create Them: A Theology of the Body*, 174). He strongly rejects the idea that God created us in a way that predisposes us to sin by the very nature of who we are as man and woman. Such an idea disrupts the notion of humanity and the vocational calling of marriage as a reflection of God. Instead, John Paul II offers the following meaning to "naked and not ashamed": "In such a relationship, the words 'they did not feel shame' can only signify (*in sensu obliquo* [in an indirect sense]) an original depth in affirming what is inherent in the person, that is, what is 'visibly' feminine and masculine... To this fullness of 'exterior' perception, expressed by physical nakedness, corresponds the 'interior' fullness of the vision of man in God, that is, according to the measure of the 'image of God' (see Gen. 1:27). According to this measure, man 'is' truly naked ('they were naked'), even before becoming aware of it (see Gen. 3:7-10)" (*Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 176-177).

Having made Adam and Eve in his own image, having placed them in community with himself and one another, and having given them their vocational directives as a means of living out their primary calling to love God and love each other, God allowed the man and woman to begin to freely live out their purpose. This included the freedom to choose. Without free choice, the perfection of creation, including the man and woman's calling to love God and love each other, would have been an illusion. The man and woman had to be allowed to decide how they would respond to God's love, care, and guidance lest they be manipulated into a predetermined relationship with God, thereby destroying a true reflection of the image of God within them.⁴⁴

Regrettably, they made the wrong choice. As Genesis 3 details, the woman chose to listen to something other than the voice of God.⁴⁵ In compromising her vocational attachment, first to God then also to her husband, the disruption of sin became a reality in a once perfectly ordered creation. Once Eve partook of the fruit, Adam also participated in her disobedience. Both Adam and Eve knew the restriction. Adam knew it from God's own word to him (Gen. 2:17), and Eve either from God directly or by transmission from Adam (Gen. 3:2).⁴⁶ Regardless, they both participated in the disobedience, and without a

⁴⁴ The witness of scripture consistently links free choice with either fullness of life in God by obedience or death and destruction due to disobedience; see Deut. 30:15-18, *et al.*

⁴⁵ The serpent's call to be like God, "knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5) does not suggest a move from a blissfully innocent ignorance to a harsh, shameful knowledge. The serpent's call was their enticement to becoming self-directed, determining "what is good for me" and "what is bad for me," which is a prerogative that belongs only to God.

⁴⁶ Note God's comment to Adam in 3:17 regarding Eve's seduction of Adam away from God, "Because you listened to your wife..." There is great debate over who was responsible for the fall of humanity, the woman or the man. Paul assigns blame rather pointedly to Eve in 1 Tim. 2:14 ("Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor"), but he also lays the blame on Adam in Rom. 5:12 ("sin came into the world through one man"). While it is not within the scope of this paper to pursue this debate, Reno (*Genesis*, 90-91) answers the question by offering the idea that "original sin" is not original to humanity, but that Adam and Eve's transgression was repetitive of Satan's nature that already existed and was brought forth in the serpent's enticement. "Only Satan's spiritual fall is

common focus on God's calling, the couple's own self-motivated impulses forever fractured their shared vocational calling.

When sin enters the marriage relationship, the center of the relationship is shifted from God to self. When "self" becomes god, isolation occurs, as multiple ruling systems are now competing for dominancy. From that point on, everything is then devoted to the worship and protection and perseverance of the god of "me." The vocational marriage relationship cannot be maintained in a self-centered existence. So, rather than partnering with God to experience the fullness of life in God, rather than reflecting the goodness of God, the present reality is a relationship founded on isolation, and framed by seduction away from God, shame,⁴⁷ fear, guilt, blame, a cursed existence, and destroyed communication.

The once equal partnership that focused on perpetuating the goodness of God is now a broken relationship that struggles for dominance, as each partner wants his/her "god of self" to rule. The God-ordained act of exercising dominion over the animals by naming them (2:19-20) is applied to Eve as Adam's first act after the fall narrative (3:20),⁴⁸ the first evidence of the power struggle that now exists. The vocational equality

originative." Adam and Eve's fault was in repeating behavior that rebelled against God before creation. Hence, Adam and Eve's excuses before God (3:12-13) are equally hollow and invalid.

⁴⁷ Certainly shame can have positive effects for shaping human relationships and observing proper boundaries (Jer. 6:15; see also Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 171-174; Westermann, *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 23, *et al.*), but the shame that Adam and Eve bear is portrayed as a completely negative experience that is totally foreign to the relationship they previously shared with each other and with God.

⁴⁸ This naming of the woman is radically different from the naming in Genesis 2:23. The naming in 2:23 is a joyous declaration of man's completeness in God's gift of woman. In the post-fall world of the biblical record, giving a name to someone or something is an act of dominion or indication of pervasive power. This can be expressed as a physical reality of one's submission to a higher earthly authority (Gen. 41:45; 2 Kgs. 23:34; 24:17; Dan. 1:7, *et al.*). It can also be expressed as a spiritual reality of God's current or impending work or judgment (Gen. 17:5, 15; 32:28; Jer. 20:3-4, *et al.*). Although the man exhibits kindness in naming his wife, it is still a self-motivated exertion of his will over her, and thus a breaking of the theocentric, cooperative vocational nature that existed prior to the fall.

that was once centered in God is now tainted by sin, and the mission of vocational participation is now replaced with a self-centered, self-gratifying, self-preserving existence.

Paul rather pointedly reminds us that all share in Adam and Eve's sinful nature (Rom. 3:23, *et al.*), and thus all marriages are a product of a broken creation. In bringing sin into God's creation order, Adam and Eve changed the vocational nature of marriage, and of all of life. Participation in the creation act through procreation is disrupted by the pain associated with childbearing (Gen. 3:16). The idea of the partnership of "helpmate" is reduced to a subservient role (Gen. 3:16). The work of caring for creation is disrupted by the curse on the ground (Gen. 3:17-19). The introduction of sin caused a radical shift in worldview from what Adam and Eve knew before the fall. Rather than a theocentrically-focused life in God, they became trapped in a self-focused world that perpetuates isolationism and cycles of seduction away from God, shame, fear, guilt, blame, and punishment; a world in which we are still deeply enmeshed.⁴⁹ In short, we cannot love God first and our most intimate neighbor second if the god of self rules. The past, perfect reality of Genesis 1-2 is now shattered, and the present, broken reality of Genesis 3 is the norm.

A Renewed Call to Vocational Marriage

⁴⁹ Reno states, "When we fail to see what reality is for, we cannot help but disfigure the intrinsic goodness of creation. The sight of life stripped of divine purpose (i.e., vocation) is not pleasant... When the eyes of the soul become carnal, taking the physical and finite as the measure of all things, the testimony of creation awakens a sense of shame. We know ourselves pursuing a futile life-project—even as we commit ourselves fully to its futility" (Genesis, 92, parentheses mine).

The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are a Christian's empowerment to love God and love our neighbor in a fallen world. If Genesis 3 describes the beginning of a self-serving, self-gratifying, individualistic isolation that destroys marriage as a vocational pursuit, then 2 Corinthians 5:15 loudly proclaims the great reversal brought about by God through Christ: "And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." It is a husband and wife's joint call back to a restored relationship with God (2 Cor. 5:21) and participation in the new creation. Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection, and we called to become participants in the resurrection life.⁵⁰

Just as Adam and Eve brought death, Christ brings life. Just as sin brought separation, Christ brings unity. Thus, we hear a clear call for active participation in moving a broken creation marred by sin toward participation in the new creation that will be culminated at Christ's return. This is not a return to Eden, but a move toward the new creation, the new heaven and the new earth, similar in its perfection and holistic nature in God, but not the exact same. It is taking the shattered existence of the present reality and putting the pieces back together. As N. T. Wright says, if God began this great reversal in Jesus which is moving us to the end times, then "we now get to share in doing bits that

⁵⁰ Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), 20-21, observes, "[Paul] is proclaiming the apocalyptic message that through the cross God has nullified the *kosmos* of sin and death and brought a new *kosmos* into being." We live in the "here, but not yet" kingdom of God. "The ends of the ages have overlapped" (1 Cor. 10:11), and "the redemptive power of God has already broken into the present time." Though we exist in the fallen world with all its brokenness, we are living the resurrection life, anticipating God's final restoration and eternal rule. (See also George Eldon Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 436-439 for a more detailed discussion of Paul's use of "*kosmos*.")

are going to turn into the new creation...we can do re-creation here and now because it has already begun with Jesus.”⁵¹

For Paul, participation in the resurrection life is the same as participation in the ministry of reconciliation, a reorientation of life cognizant of the new creation (v. 16-18). Although Paul is invoking reconciliation in his relationship with the Corinthians, his words bear a “message of reconciliation” that is universal in scope (v.19). That message is mediated through “Christ’s ambassadors” (v. 20) for the sake of imploring all to come to know reconciliation to God through Christ. Christ stands as the constant reminder of and access into the new creation God has prepared for us (v. 21).⁵²

Since reconciliation is mediated through human agency, Christian marriage stands as a powerful intermediary of the divine existence.⁵³ The ministry of reconciliation is a means of “holding the vertical (cosmic relationship of God with creation) and horizontal (humanity’s relationship to each other as mediated by God) together”⁵⁴ Gary Thomas

⁵¹ N. T. Wright. Interviewed by Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report*. Originally aired June 19, 2008 on Comedy Central. Accessed at www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/174352/june-19-2008/bishop-n-t-wright, Nov. 23, 2010. For further information on re-creationist theology, see Wright’s *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper One, 2008).

⁵² Matera, 139ff.

⁵³ The Catechism of the Catholic Church also links marriage to the work of reconciliation. Marriage is seen as “an efficacious sign of Christ’s presence,” that Jesus came “to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin,” and “he himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God.” For the believer, “The entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church.” The Catechism goes on to express marriage as a vocational participation toward a realized eschatological end. Participation in the ministry of reconciliation restores and reaffirms marriage as kingdom vocation. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, part ii, sec. ii, ch. iii, art. vii., 1612-1617. www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm#II (accessed February 12, 2009).

⁵⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 53.

says, “Marriage can be that holy place, the site of a relationship that proclaims God’s love to the world.”⁵⁵ Thomas then goes on to say:

The key question is this: Will we approach marriage from a God-centered view or a man-centered view? In a man-centered view, we will maintain our marriage as long as our earthly comforts, desires, and expectations are met. In a God-centered view, we preserve our marriage because it brings glory to God and points a sinful world to a reconciling Creator...If I believe the primary purpose of marriage is to model God’s love for his church, I will enter this relationship and maintain it with an entirely new motivation, one hinted at by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians: “So we make it our goal to please him” (2 Corinthians 5:9).⁵⁶

Since marriage is the station in life embraced by the majority, for Christians, marriage must become the central place for reclaiming the primary calling of loving God and loving one’s neighbor. This is the deliberate movement of married couples toward holiness, a holistic, relational existence, and an embracing of the *imago Dei* and of the new *kosmos*. Through Christ, we live in an unseen reality that exists both as a part of physical creation and separate from it.

In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul fleshes out specific attitudes and actions that reflect this move away from self-pursuant isolation and back toward the vocational call of marriage. Chief among those characteristics within the context of the ministry of reconciliation is love (v. 14). Love is the foundation on which all else rests. Christ’s love offers both the motivation and the boundaries for the ministry of reconciliation. The compulsion of Christ’s love is grounded in his willingness to go to the cross and die for all, but also in the power of his resurrection from the dead; the power Paul is now imploring his readers to embrace as they live the resurrection life. Paul reemphasizes the sacrificial aspect of the power of the cross in verse 15 (“those who live should no longer live for themselves

⁵⁵ Gary Thomas. *Sacred Marriage*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 31.

⁵⁶ Thomas, 32-33.

but for him who died for them and was raised again”), verse 17 (“the old has gone”), and verse 21 (“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”). Verse 15 also moves Paul’s readers toward unity (one died for all so that all can live for one), and submission (we no longer put ourselves first, but him who died for us). Concepts of healing (in Christ we are part of the new creation) and forgiveness (not counting men’s sins against them) shine through in verses 17 and 19.

The Vocational Call of Marriage in Smyrna’s Context

Within the marriage context, what would a union defined by love, selflessness, unity, submission, humility, healing, and forgiveness look like? What would such a union say to one’s own family or to a couple’s community? Marriage that is active participation in the ministry of reconciliation will not just bring a couple closer together; it will also bring the world closer to Christ and all creation closer to its final redemption. Such a marriage is the restoration of the vocational call inherent in the pre-fall creation that is a reflection of the image of God; a vocational call that can be reclaimed through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Today, American individualism propels the isolationism of a self-serving god complex, causing it to be very, very difficult for couples to pursue kingdom vocation. Just like anywhere else, husbands and wives at Smyrna are often caught up in the cultural drive to be self-reliant, individualistic, and self-centric, never realizing they are serving the god of “self” and destroying the vocational aspect of their marriage relationship. The church can inadvertently perpetuate this brokenness by sending couples down separate ministry tracks. While potentially serving a good cause, the church often fails to

recognize that it is not serving the couples themselves or the greater call of what they could be doing together participating in life in God.

There has to be a strong return to emphasis on the “one flesh” aspect of marriage, especially in our teaching and liturgy. Because of our individualistic culture, it is difficult for couples to understand that what one spouse does always affects the other. If he hurts, she hurts. If she is joyful, he is joyful. One’s mindfulness of his or her spouse is the strongest reflection of one’s immersion into the wholeness of God. However, embracing “one flesh” as the outlet for our vocational calling in marriage is difficult because it is a “profound mystery” (Eph. 5:32). It is always easier to embrace the physical and concrete than it is to embrace the spiritual and mystic.

If the church will lead couples to embrace the idea of a vocational theology of marriage, return to a liturgy of “one flesh,” and help husbands and wives see love for their spouse as their primary outlet for reflecting their love for God, then couples will begin to model reconciliation to a broken world. They will live in the resurrection life, moving toward the Parousia.

Exactly how that is played out will be very different from couple to couple. Couples would consistently model love, forgiveness, partnership, theocentric living, and a host of other behaviors linked to the vocation of marriage as it is lived out through the ministry of reconciliation. The church’s role would be to consistently teach and reaffirm the vocational call, encourage intentionality among married couples, and provide routes to bring the spiritual and the physical together as a means of living out the gospel of reconciliation.

Conclusion

“Sacred Scripture begins with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God and concludes with a vision of ‘the wedding-feast of the Lamb.’”⁵⁷ The “book ends” of scripture present two unique views of marriage: marriage as it was experienced at creation and marriage as the divine analogy of the final reconciliation of creation back to God. The vocational call of marriage at creation was destroyed by sin. In Christ, the vocational call of marriage is a renewed call leading husbands and wives, and all of creation, back into relationship with God.⁵⁸

In light of God’s design and intent for marriage, our vocational calling to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, our participation in the resurrection life, and given the Smyrna eldership’s acknowledged state of marriage within the Smyrna congregation, how do we move toward fostering marriages that participate in the reconciliation of creation back to God? The obvious first move is to articulate a vocational theology of marriage for the congregation; a process which will be outlined in the next chapter.

⁵⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, part ii, sec. ii, ch. iii, art. vii.1602.
www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c3a7.htm#1604 (accessed February 12, 2009).

⁵⁸ Jurgen Moltmann. *God in Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 215ff. Moltmann’s template of *imago Dei*, *imago Christi*, and *Gloria Dei* undergirds a married couple’s participation in the ministry of reconciliation. As male and female, we bear the image of God, but the image is marred by sin. Yet, in the image of Christ we tear down the dividing wall of hostility and participate with God to reconcile the world back to him, as we look forward to that glorious day of the final resurrection.

CHAPTER 3

DISCERNING A VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

Starting with the premise that a married couple is expected to partner together, participating vocationally in the resurrection life by way of participation in the ministry of reconciliation, the Smyrna congregation found it necessary to discern a biblically-based vocational theology of marriage. This chapter outlines the rationale and process used for selecting a discernment group. Sections from Evan B. Howard's *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality*⁵⁹ were used to provide the framework for educating and orienting the group to the spiritual practice of discernment. The discernment group participated in six one-hour sessions that included in-depth study of the main biblical passages outlined in the theology section, discussion of the passages' relevance to the development of a vocational theology of marriage, and further reflection between each of the sessions which was guided by question sets. By the end of the six sessions, the group hoped to produce a concisely articulated, communally discerned "Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ"⁶⁰ as a final product. The discernment group also participated in a seventh one-hour session, meeting with Smyrna's eldership for the purpose of reviewing the final product. The seventh session included discussion of the

⁵⁹ Evan B. Howard, *The Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Also hereafter referred to as "document in progress," "vocational theology document," "final product," "final statement," and "theology statement."

discernment process, input from the eldership on the validity of the final product, and thoughts on how to best implement the final product into the life of the congregation. Prior to this final session, the eldership was presented with the discernment group's final product and asked to review it individually and collectively, and respond to a question set after their session with the discernment team.

This chapter also reviews the process used for gathering and analyzing data sets provided by discernment group members and by the eldership. My personal observations and notes, the six weekly questions sets provided by the discernment group members, and the question set completed by each elder provided the three angles of triangulation for analysis of the project that is presented in Chapter 4.

Discernment Group Participants

Although it is practiced in varying degrees,⁶¹ at present the concept of discernment as a spiritual gift and a spiritual practice is not a common part of Smyrna's vocabulary. For this reason, prior to the intervention it was necessary to educate the participants on the concept of discernment as a beneficial spiritual discipline. Instructions were given in a written format prior to the first session to make sure participants understood what was expected of them in this process.

The goal of discernment is that we might find the mind of Christ among us. Within the congregation, it is the move from an individually practiced Christology to

⁶¹ The eldership at Smyrna has made conscientious efforts over the last year to direct the church family back toward discernment as a spiritual practice. All ministry meetings are to begin with hearing the Word and prayer, meetings end with prayer, and there is a far greater presence of God-centered conversation than in years past. However, we are still challenged with reforming decades of "board of directors/business-model" processes for decision making, so at times it is easy to default to non-spiritually informed forms of decision making.

corporately practiced ecclesiology.⁶² Evan B. Howard observes, “without good discernment, we might find ourselves shipwrecked in the faith.”⁶³ Howard defines discernment as “the evaluation of inner and outer stuff in light of a relationship with God with a view to response.”⁶⁴ This definition emphasizes response as the key to the discernment process, moving the end results from being theoretical to being a tangible, observable, transformational practice.

Howard goes on to give four lists relevant to the discernment process. These four lists were shared with the discernment team with brief explanations at each point. The first list is the five basic principles that inform the discernment process: 1) God wants to be known; 2) we encounter ambiguity when identifying God’s presence or activity; 3) these ambiguities necessitate evaluation; 4) this evaluation requires process; and 5) discerning evaluation requires both gift and skill.⁶⁵ The second list is what Howard calls the “virtues in preparation for discernment” which are: 1) freedom in faith; 2) commitment to obedience; 3) shared concerns; 4) listening; 5) humility; 6) prayer; 7) wisdom; and 8) love.⁶⁶ These virtues were especially relevant to the group discernment process. The third list involves each participant’s preparation for the weekly discernment sessions and includes: 1) seeing the sessions as holy moments; 2) disclosing yourself in simplicity when you speak; 3) listening with self-discernment and self criticism; 4) being

⁶² Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 127ff.

⁶³ Howard, 373.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 375.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 373-374. Howard’s criteria reemphasize the relational nature of God with his creation, but also the brokenness that results from living in a fallen world.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 384-385.

willing to take the time necessary for discernment; 5) being prepared to adjust; 6) going where God leads; 7) being willing to leave the familiar and risk the unfamiliar; and 8) knowing how the larger community of the church operates.⁶⁷ The final list deals with the sources that should have informed the group's discernment: 1) scripture; 2) experience; 3) community; 4) nature; 5) reason; and 6) circumstances.⁶⁸ These lists were reviewed throughout the sessions and posted in the meeting room as a consistent reminder of the discernment team's purpose.

While being reminded of the items in Howard's lists, discernment team participants were consistently called upon to recognize what we were doing as a spiritual activity rather than a "board of directors" type decision making process. Therefore, it was essential that participants listen: listen to the voice of God in scripture, listen to each other, and observe God's activity in the life of the congregation.⁶⁹ They were reminded that the discernment in which we engaged was not necessarily a moral discernment. The purpose of this project was to engage in what Howard calls "a kind of ongoing life discernment" rather than a single "situational discernment" addressing a specific moral issue.⁷⁰

In addition to being instructed in the spiritual discipline of group discernment, the following criteria were observed when inviting people to participate with the discernment

⁶⁷ Ibid., 386.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 390. This list was especially pertinent in a group discernment regarding marriage, particularly issues of scripture and experience.

⁶⁹ Although this is not specifically an ethnography project, the final product should be reflective of a group narrative that is reflective of a congregational narrative.

⁷⁰ Howard, 373. Obviously, any discernment that involves marriage is a moral discernment, but the final theology produced will not address one specific question that only affects one specific moment in time.

team.⁷¹ First, participants were believed to have a high regard for healthy marriages and understand the effect of marriage on the church community. Given the context that is prompting this project, it would have been counter-productive to try to discern a vocation theology of marriage with a group that was inclined to maintain a reactive stance on the relationship between marriage and congregational practice. Second, participants were believed to be humble, attentive, prayerful listeners. Without the spiritual discipline of listening, it would have been impossible to discern a theology of vocational marriage relevant to the congregation. Also, without active listening skills, team members would have been consistently hindered by their own backgrounds and prejudices. Third, participants were believed to be able to process and reflect on theological concepts regarding marriage. Without a proper theological foundation, there was a danger of defaulting to solutions driven by contemporary culture, pop psychology, church tradition, or other sources that are not biblically informed. Fourth, participants were believed to be able to connect theological concepts to real life situations in a way that moves the church toward life in God.⁷² The goal was to let God's word inform and transform us while also remembering that God's work is often through human agency.⁷³ Fifth, it was essential to

⁷¹ Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985), 202. Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, 2nd Edition*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 234-235.

⁷² For those who were apprehensive about their qualifications to participate in a discernment group, I continually reminded them they exercise spiritual discernment on a regular basis personally, making decisions in light of scripture as it interacts with their own personal lives. This recognition of daily discernment as a spiritual practice made the transition to group discernment smoother. They were also regularly reminded that they were chosen for a reason and that each individual brought something unique to the group.

⁷³ Finding the balance between theory and practice, information and transformation, may well have been the most difficult movement of this project. Luke Timothy Johnson notes that "[p]ractical thinking is messy. Most of us are strong on theory, for theory is clear and clean and stands still. But thinking about the ever shifting face of real life brings terror to the mind. The subject matter does not hold steady. Worse, it

have a reasonable balance of male and female voices as a part of the discernment group. While both spouses of a couple were invited to participate, it was expected there would be several cases in which a husband or wife would have to decline. In these cases, the other spouse was still allowed to participate, provided the balance of voices remained within an acceptable range. An acceptable range was deemed thirty-five to forty percent of one gender against sixty to sixty-five percent of the other gender. Even in cases where one mate was unable to participate, it was expected that the participating mate would share the information discussed with his or her mate, and allow the non-present mate's input to influence the discernment process.⁷⁴

The desired mix of participants reflected a wide cross section of the congregation in order to maintain balance and yield viewpoints informed by diverse backgrounds. The most significant demographic representations desired were: 1) a long term stable marriage of fifty years or more; 2) a couple married seven years or less; 3) a non-traditional couple as defined in the first chapter; 4) ethnic diversity; 5) generational diversity; and 6) someone committed to sacred singleness.

While couples fitting the major demographic representations noted above were more easily identifiable, those invited to participate were also asked to provide a brief history as a means of denoting other marriage or family situations that could have be to this research project. Other noteworthy descriptions included categories such as couples who have gone through significant storms that put their marriage at risk. Specific

takes hold of the thinker, preventing distance and discretion.” (*Scripture & Discernment: Decision Making in the Church*, p. 9.)

⁷⁴ In these cases, the non-participating mate was not considered a part of the discernment team even though the non-participant likely influenced his or her mate's reflection and input.

situations could have varied from physical or emotional affair, infertility or miscarriage, loss of an older child, bankruptcy, injury or illness, and a wide variety of other types of physical, spiritual, and emotional stresses. Also, economic diversity, couples without children apart from infertility, and other significant designations were noted.

Based on the demographic criteria above and the scope and purpose of the project, the maximum number of family units participating was limited to twelve and the minimum number of family units necessary to implement the project was determined to be seven. The twelve family unit maximum provided ample room for each individual to fully participate. The seven family unit minimum was needed to provide an adequate cross section of the congregation.⁷⁵

All family units invited to participate were given a letter explaining the scope and purpose of the seven weekly sessions and an outline description of the sessions. The letter was delivered seven days prior to the project, with a deadline for agreeing to participate four days prior to the project. This allowed time to find replacements if necessary. For the sake of convenience, all of the necessary releases and permission forms were included with the invitation letter.

Ultimately, twenty-two people participated in the discernment group; eleven men and eleven women. All six of the major criteria categories were represented.⁷⁶ Other notable categories that affected the perspective and input of participants included divorce,

⁷⁵ Lincoln and Guba, 199-202. Based on Lincoln and Guba's guidelines and the criteria established for the discernment group, more than twelve family units would prove redundant, and less than seven might fail to establish a representative sampling.

⁷⁶ See Appendix D.

infertility, financial problems, addictions, current marital conflict ranging from mild to extreme, long-term and/or chronic illness, and pregnancy, among others.⁷⁷

Protocol for Discernment Sessions

Meetings were scheduled for each Wednesday night, for seven consecutive sessions, from seven to eight o'clock p.m. Meeting on Wednesday nights during the regular mid-week Bible class time allowed participants with young children to utilize the children's Bible classes for child care during the sessions. The discernment team met in the adult library and media room upstairs in the education wing. The design of this room provided a relaxed, non-institutional setting that was believed to facilitate conversation, while still providing all the necessary technical equipment.

All sessions were video recorded. This served as a verification and reminder of discussions occurring during session meetings. The video recordings were available to participants who missed any given sessions. Group participants who had to utilize the video recordings recognized that by missing a session they were limited in participation and perspective. In retrospect, they could make observations on words or behaviors they observed in the video, but they were unable to provide real-time comment or ask for real-time clarification. Also, the video only presented one specific visual and audio perspective of the session. Therefore, group members who viewed the video missed the expressions and body language of any participants who were outside the video frame, and could potentially miss some audio commentary.

⁷⁷ Of the secondary categories listed, some directly affected the marriages of participants involved while others affected the participant's immediate families, but still heavily influenced his or her reading of scripture and process of discernment.

In addition to the video recordings of each session, I also kept field notes of each discussion. The notes were reviewed each Thursday morning and organized and coded. In addition to my own personal notes, I also asked one participant to keep detailed notes. I instructed this participant in protocol and procedure for her field notes. I collected her notes each week for coding and for reflective comparison to my own notes.

The protocol for taking field notes conformed to the model outlined by Mary Clark Moschella in *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction*.⁷⁸ Moschella acknowledges that “all descriptions are selective and partial,” but one can still strive for “a full and credible account.”⁷⁹ Moschella recommends that all identifying data that can be recorded before the session begins—time, date, location, purpose, those in attendance, and any other relevant information—should be written down immediately.⁸⁰ This provides clarity when later attempting to reconstruct a session. Also, by attending to those details ahead of time, the note taker is free to wholly participate as soon as the session begins.

In each session, the note takers engaged themselves fully, taking in sights, sounds, smells, and the physical surroundings. The task was not just listening to the words spoken, but also watching for body language, observing interactions between participants, listening for repeated words or phrases, taking note of silences, seeing who

⁷⁸ See Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2008). Note particularly chapter 5, 115ff.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 116. Part of the participant note taker’s role was to help me identify my own personal biases and if I was allowing those biases to unduly move the project in a particular direction.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 118.

was actively engaged in the process and who was passive, and watching for reactions that were particular to a specific demographic.⁸¹

It was essential to recognize that the note takers were also active participants in the discernment group. Therefore, in order to be able to be fully engaged, note takers needed to utilize some style of short-hand that employs “key or colorful phrases” that would “jog the memory” for a more fully realized reconstruction of the session to be written up at a later time.⁸² It was necessary to instruct the participant note taker to provide more fully realized accounts of the sessions as soon as possible, for a stronger, more accurate recollection of each session.

Throughout the discernment process, a collaboratively discerned document titled, “Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ” was contributed to and revised each week. This document was sent out to team participants each week as an e-mail attachment. In the e-mail, I requested reflection and feedback on the developing document. Said feedback was to be shared with all team members via the “Reply to All” button. For the sake of confidentiality, in every e-mail, group members were reminded to only circulate e-mails pertaining to the project within the discernment group.

Each week, discernment team participants were given an outline of information to be covered in that week’s session with room on the handout for personal notes and observations.⁸³ In addition to an outline, each week participants were given a set of questions coinciding with that week’s study, which they were to reflect upon and answer

⁸¹ Ibid., 116-118.

⁸² Ibid., 119.

⁸³ See Appendix E.

in writing.⁸⁴ Each week's question set was taken up during the first part of the following week's session. Participants were asked to view the video of any missed sessions prior to the next session and still complete question sets and reflections on the document in progress. Ideally, these written reflections showed each participant's discernment journey and also functioned as the data set for evaluation of the participant's perspective of the process and final product.

General Outline of Sessions

The discernment team met together for six weeks to produce a "Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ" document, while meeting a seventh week with the eldership. The first five weeks consisted of sessions that studied and discussed marriage as kingdom-building vocation through participation in the ministry of reconciliation. Each of the first five sessions began with scripture reading and prayer. The scripture reading coincided with that week's passage to be studied. Rather than a typical "prayer list" format, the prayer was specific to our function, asking God to pour out his Spirit upon us and to bless and guide us in our discernment process.

In the first session, after the scripture reading and prayer, I reviewed the purpose of the project and the expected final goal. Participants were reminded of the functional meaning of "vocation," given a quick review of the key points from the group discernment handout, and reminded of any other necessary terms or concepts. In sessions

⁸⁴ Questions were designed to stimulate critical reflection on theological concepts as they relate to real life situations. Because participants were volunteers, the number of questions was limited to around five per week so as to not make participants feel overburdened, thus diminishing participation and skewing the results of the project. See Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach for Doctor of Ministry Programs*, (unpublished manuscript, May 13, 2010), 62-64 for guidelines on constructing questions. See Appendix F for the questions that were used with discernment team participants and with the eldership.

two through five, I asked for any new insight to the previous week's discussion. I then collected the written responses to the previous week's questions. This process took approximately ten minutes of each week's session.

Next, I led the group in an in depth study of the primary passages from the theology section of this thesis. Attention was given to specific words, concepts, and movements that tied the passages together and that informed the final product. The first week, we focused on the Genesis 1-2 text, noting particularly God's design for marriage as a reflection of the divine relationship. Returning to the Genesis 1-2 passage, the second week highlighted God's design for marriage as vocation. Week three we advanced the narrative to Genesis 3 and looked at the brokenness of marriage as a result of sin and living in a fallen world. The fourth week the discussion moved to 2 Corinthians 5 and focused on understanding what the ministry of reconciliation entails. The final week of textual study focused on the 2 Corinthians passage and how marriage, as participation in the ministry of reconciliation, is a means of reclaiming our marriage vocation. The textual study took approximately twenty minutes each session.

After the study, the remaining session time (approximately thirty minutes each week) concentrated on discussion of that evening's passage. Each week, I had a handout with statements and questions that focused that session's discussion. This set of statements and questions was meant to guide the discernment process and was not the set of questions participants were given to reflect upon and answer prior to the next session. As discussion progressed each session, concepts and elements were progressively added to a master document which informed the final vocational theology. Participants were

asked to reflect on what concepts they felt flowed out of that week's text that would be significant for inclusion in the final document.

The purpose of the sixth session for the discernment team was to finalize the "Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ" document. After the fifth session and prior to the sixth, I synthesized the concepts, ideas, and reflections that had thus far been added to the master vocational theology document. I prayerfully used an intuitive process for synthesizing the document with primary consideration to scriptural validity and also to congregational relevance.⁸⁵ The final document was intended to be obviously biblical, relevant to the context of the congregation, positive in how it was phrased, clear in its charge to Smyrna's membership, and in line with Smyrna's Vision and Values statements that provide the framework for Smyrna's ecclesiology.⁸⁶ The synthesized document was presented to participants three days prior to the sixth session so that they could come into the sixth session better prepared.

The sixth session began with a review of primary scriptures that informed the document. After this review, we read aloud the synthesis of the concepts the team had contributed to the document in the five weeks prior. Then, the floor was opened for honest reflection. We discussed common findings and addressed divergent viewpoints, seeking a common consensus of the group's discernment that was articulated in the final document. If the discernment group felt we could not reach a satisfactory consensus during the sixth session, I left open the option of having a seventh session the following

⁸⁵ Lincoln and Guba, p. 40, refer to this as "utilization of tacit knowledge." This method is preferred because, while the use of propositional knowledge can put the individual pieces of the final document together, without tacit knowledge to inform and appreciate the "nuances of multiple realities" as brought out by the discernment group, it would have been an incomplete picture. Also, because this is a theological pursuit, tacit knowledge "mirrors more fairly and accurately the value patterns of the investigator," and (hopefully) the discernment group participants as well.

⁸⁶ See Appendix G.

week. To accommodate this possibility, the eldership was alerted to the fact that the remainder of the process described below could have been delayed by one week.

Once a consensus was reached, I prepared a final written version of the theological statement for presentation to the eldership. This was then emailed to the discernment team, and team participants were given three days to review the final written form and suggest any changes. All team participants were apprised of any suggested changes after the sixth session, via the “Reply to All” button. At the end of the sixth session, I gave the participants a final set of questions asking for their reflections on the final product, but asked them not to start writing until after the three day final reflection and review timetable had passed.

The final product was submitted to the eldership the following Sunday morning. Each elder was asked to personally reflect on and review the document, reflect on and review it with his own spouse, and then to reflect on and review it collectively with the other elders at their regular elders’ meeting the next night. Robert Mullins, an elder who, along with his wife, participated in the project, led that review and reflection. For that meeting, I intended to be a non-participant observer. At the end of that meeting, the elders were given a set of questions pertaining to the document,⁸⁷ and asked to answer and turn it in no later than the following Sunday.

The seventh and final session was a meeting between the discernment team and the eldership. Howard notes “this is where the relationship between authority and the

⁸⁷ I asked for the questions the following Sunday rather than the Wednesday of the meeting because some of the questions pertained to each elder’s perception and reflections on the meeting with the discernment team. Although they would have been willing to provide completed answers that evening, I wanted them to have several days to reflect.

discerning community comes in to play.”⁸⁸ The meeting began with scripture and prayer. This took five minutes. The discernment team took approximately thirty minutes to discuss their personal and collective reflections on the group discernment process particular to this project. After the team had a chance to reflect and field questions from the elders regarding the experience, the eldership had the remaining time to present their reflections on the final document. In this session, the eldership did not note any changes to the final document necessary to bring the document in line with Smyrna’s mission, vision, and values statements. During the final ten minutes, the discussion turned to prayerful consideration of how to begin implementing this theology into the ministry structure of the congregation.

Evaluation of Discernment Group Process

Because the objective of this project was to produce a theological discernment that would influence the whole church community at Smyrna, a qualitative methodology was a more appropriate fit than a quantitative approach. If the project produced a truly formative theological movement that was informed by scripture and Smyrna’s congregational context, there was a real possibility that it would not be popular, as it would call for potentially uncomfortable change in how many in the congregation currently view and experience marriage. In a quantitatively-driven project, the resulting final product would have run a greater risk of being influenced by popularly accepted,

⁸⁸ Howard, 395. “Authority” is a poor term in this circumstance because of the negative connotation it can carry (though I do not believe Howard intends a negative connotation). “Shepherding” would be a more fitting term within the context of this project.

secularly influenced, cultural norms than by scripture.⁸⁹ Also, a qualitative method allowed for greater adaptability in “dealing with multiple (and less aggregatable) realities”⁹⁰ that would emerge from discussions on marriage.

Feedback from this group discernment project was evaluated from three different perspectives. The triangulation of the three perspectives provided a clearer lens for interpreting the results, and also served to minimize participants’ personal biases being reflected in the final product.⁹¹ The three sources of triangulation were: 1) my own personal participation and observations; 2) the six weekly questions sets completed by the discernment team members; and 3) the question sets completed by the eldership.

The protocol for analyzing the collected data again followed Moshella’s guidelines.⁹² The question sets provided by the participants, my own notes on the sessions, and the question sets from the eldership were first analyzed individually as the data sets were turned in each week. I was looking for repetition of words, phrases, ideas, or key themes. As these categories emerged, I made notations and charted the findings.⁹³ Once all data sets were complete and individually reviewed, the data sets were scrutinized collectively for convergences and divergences. Through the course of these

⁸⁹ This is not to belittle the desire of most in the Smyrna congregation to embody God’s Word, but rather a recognition that the discernment of theology, while done in community, should not be primarily guided by popular opinion.

⁹⁰ Lincoln and Guba, 40.

⁹¹ Moschella, 184-187. See also Patton, 187-189. Lincoln and Guba, 283, state, “No single item of information (unless it comes from an elite and unimpeachable source) should ever be given serious consideration unless it can be triangulated.” It is impossible to remove all bias, and this is particularly true in a project involving marriage. In marriage, a person will either repeat or rebel (positively or negatively) against the model of marriage with which he or she was raised. The bias formed by one’s experience is often ingrained to the point that he or she does not recognize the power of its influence.

⁹² Ibid., 167ff.

⁹³ Ibid., 175-176.

analyses, I expected an as-yet unknown ethnographic and research design to unfold. I expected this design to challenge current perceptions while leading the entire discernment team into a new understanding of Smyrna's theological narrative.⁹⁴ Information gleaned from both individual and collective analyses was recorded electronically in a password protected file.

Personal Participation

As a participant in the discernment team, I was both observing and providing input into the formation of the final product.⁹⁵ After leading the in-depth study of the selected Bible passage, I transitioned into facilitating the discussion. I took careful notes during the discussion portion of each session, noting other participants' words, tone, actions, interactions, silences, and body language. Each Thursday, I reviewed my notes from the Wednesday session. Since I was leading the theology study, it was necessary each Thursday for me to view the video of the previous night's session and review the participant note taker's notes. This provided a means of evaluating my own words and actions through my personal observations and the note taker's perceptions. I organized and analyzed the data according to Moschella's guidelines as detailed above, being as

⁹⁴ Lincoln and Guba, 41, describe this as "emergent design." Emergent design disallows a priori construction of the outcome of the research. In a group theological discernment—particularly on marriage, influenced by widely varied backgrounds and experiences—it would be presumptuous to predict the final outcome of the project.

⁹⁵ Moschella, 139. Moschella states that being a participant rather than a detached observer can "open up more questions, both personal and professional, than we might expect." After recently completing an ethnographic study of marriages at Smyrna, many of my perceptions about the state of marriage in this congregation were affirmed, but other common themes that emerged revealed my own personal biases. It will be a blessing to continue to engage my own personal lenses on marriage against other participant's lenses. Another helpful tool in assessing my own motivations for this project comes from Moschella's "Guidelines for Research Plan," (84, Figure 1).

attentive as possible to reflexivity.⁹⁶ My personal observations were recorded in a password protected electronic file. These notes served to: 1) make me aware of my own biases and theological orientation in regard to the vocational nature of marriage as a participation in the ministry of reconciliation; and 2) serve as a data set for interpreting the implications of a vocational theology of marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ.

Discernment Team Analysis

The second angle of triangulation came from the discernment team. The weekly question sets turned in by the team served to map out each participant's own theological and ecclesiological journey. The question sets in effect served as each participant's field journal of the discernment process, as well as his or her reflections on the final product. These question sets were analyzed and coded, again according to Moschella's guidelines as described above. At the end of the project intervention, the participants' question sets were compared for convergence and divergence of significant words, phrases, and themes.⁹⁷ The sets were also analyzed from week to week to see if there was a shift in how particular theological words and concepts were used or interpreted by individual participants. Analysis and observations garnered from the participants' question sets were compared to my notes regarding participants' words and behaviors during specific sessions. This information set was recorded in an electronic format and kept in a password protected file.

⁹⁶ Lincoln and Guba, 327, suggest keeping a "reflexive journal." The journal consists of: 1) a schedule and logistics of the study; 2) a personal diary focused on personal reflections; and 3) a methodological log recording rationale for methodological decisions.

⁹⁷ Patton, 402-407.

Eldership Evaluation

The final angle of analysis was the eldership's response. The eldership provided answers to a question set that presented each elder's own perception and reflections on the final product. Those perceptions and reflections were informed in three ways: 1) viewing the final product; 2) each elder having a conversation with his spouse about the final product; and 3) a conversation among the entire eldership on the final product. This process served as an exercise in personal and group discernment for the elders. The question sets from the eldership were analyzed and coded according to Moschella's guidelines as described above. Question sets from the eldership were reviewed and compared to the two other angles of analysis. These question sets were also compared to my own observations from the elders' meeting the Monday prior to their meeting with the discernment team, and their Wednesday night meeting with the discernment team. While I was again looking for convergences and divergences, special attention was also paid to personal biases regarding marriage, personal biases regarding group discernment as a guiding practice for the church, specific use of terminology, criteria for evaluating the final product, and reference (or lack thereof) to the potential impact of the theology statement on the ongoing life of the church.

Conclusion

For Smyrna to restore a proactive theology of marriage to her DNA as a congregation, it was essential to have a well discerned vocational theology of marriage. The process of producing the final product also illuminated several other important considerations in the life of the congregation: 1) the use of discernment as a spiritual

practice; 2) greater appreciation of the diversity present in the Smyrna congregation; and 3) a stronger recognition how to implement theological concepts into the realities of daily congregational life. Chapter 4's evaluation of the project will be mindful of these considerations and how they unfolded during the course of this project.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Chapter 3 described the process for this project intervention. This chapter will present the final theological statement that emerged from the discernment sessions. Using the three sources of triangulation—my own personal observations, the question sets provided by the discernment group participants, and the question sets provided by the elders—this chapter will illuminate the common themes that emerged as well as the tensions this project produced. This chapter will also detail the editing process and the rationale that shaped the final document. The immediate and future implications of this project for the Smyrna congregation will be reserved for chapter 5.

Chosen Methodology

I chose a qualitative methodology for this project as described in the previous chapter. Using a qualitative methodology—specifically discernment participation from a group that represented a wide cross-section of the congregation—allowed a greater congregational participation and ownership of the final theological statement. This methodology also allowed greater balance in representing the actual experiences of the congregation in regard to marriage, and acted as a safeguard against personal biases. Triangulating three sources to evaluate the process and the final theological statement

gave greater clarity in recognizing whether or not the objectives of shared ownership and accurate reflection of the life of the congregation occurred.

Personal Evaluation

On the whole, the discernment group sessions went as expected. The participants appeared to be engaged and genuinely invested in the goal of this project. Attendance and involvement remained strong, with the expected occasional absences due to personal sickness/ health issues, a sick child, or a previous teaching commitment. The discernment group's participation in filling out the questionnaires each week also met expectations. Some filled them out with long reflective answers while others used short concise answers. The Monday night meeting with the elders after the sixth session, the seventh session with the elders and the discernment group, and the elders' response to their question set followed a similar pattern.

Notable Challenges

This project proved to be filled with blessings and challenges. The two primary challenges were: (1) leading a group in understanding and utilizing group discernment as a spiritual practice; and (2) the theological orientation of the participants. First, for many who grew up in traditional conservative or mainline Churches of Christ, the spiritual disciplines of reading scripture, praying, and attending worship and Bible classes were stressed almost to the exclusion of any other disciplines. Therefore, although the participants were educated about and oriented to the process of group discernment as a spiritual discipline and as a means for theological reflection, many of those participating

in the discernment group had no real history or experience with this discipline.⁹⁸ This lack of firsthand experience caused participants to treat the first few sessions like a normal adult Bible class rather than as a discernment group. Instead of open and free flowing discussion that allowed for push and push back, participants seemed determined to want to come up with “the right answer.” Rather than expressing theological reflection born out of their own life experiences, participants at times were silent, waiting to see if I was “fishing for a specific answer” before they would speak out. It was obvious that the ability to disagree, and even do so forcefully and adamantly without fear of ridicule or ongoing animosity or distrust from others in the group, was not immediately present.

Along with the participants’ general unfamiliarity with group discernment as a spiritual practice, the stated goal of “discerning and articulating a vocational theology of marriage” also proved to be a hindrance. In a church fellowship that has for centuries stressed “speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent,” the stated goal seemed to some to be a diluting of scripture to meet contemporary ideology. Although never directly vocalized, in the discussion during the sessions it was obvious that some had trouble reconciling the process of using group discernment to protect a high view of scripture while still bringing scripture into a contemporary context for Smyrna.

To address these challenges, at the beginning of the third session I reminded the participants that whether we name it as such or not, as individuals we all discern theology on a regular basis. We all make daily decisions based on our faith in God and our beliefs

⁹⁸ Because the majority of the participants are involved in various ministries at Smyrna, many often participate in group decision making processes, but those processes are almost always done from a perspective of programmatic operations rather than a perspective of theological discernment and empowerment.

about right and wrong. Those theological decisions are made individually or with consideration of others' input. I also read the original "Theology of Marriage" produced in 2008⁹⁹ to remind the group that discerning theology was not beyond our capabilities and that one did not need advanced degrees in theology to have valuable input.¹⁰⁰ I reminded them that each of them was invited to be a part of the discernment group for a reason, and that each of them brought something unique to the table. This helped them to recognize that our goal was to produce something easily understood by the entire congregation, concise, contextually relevant, and fully born of scripture.

The second challenge, the theological orientation of the discernment group participants, manifested itself in several ways. Early on, it produced a degree of discomfort, as group participants seemed to be reluctant to speak openly and freely until they were able to evaluate their own position in comparison to other positions in the room. This issue resolved itself throughout the six weeks as participants became more comfortable with each other and with the functioning of a discernment group setting versus a typical, traditional Bible class setting.

The main way in which the theological orientation of the discernment group participants manifested itself centered on women's role in the church. While women's role was not the focus of this project, any discussion on marriage must take this into consideration. I expected beliefs about women's role and how that defines a wife's role in marriage to be a point of tension, but I did not expect the tension to arise quite so quickly.

⁹⁹ See Appendix C.

¹⁰⁰ In reading the original "Theology of Marriage," I reminded them that we were addressing a specific aspect of marriage theology and not attempting to make another general foundational statement. I also reminded them of the shortcomings of the original statement, both in its development and in its scope, and the motivation for this project to address a specific area of marriage theology that the original statement failed to address.

In the second session, there was a noticeable difference in the way various participants defined “helper” (Gen. 2:18). Ms. R repeatedly stated that she believed her calling from God was to be a helper to her husband, but the inflection seemed to be a willingness to be submissive to the point of being subjugated. Other women, particularly those with more dominant personalities or those who (by choice or by circumstance) had assumed a spiritual headship role in their families, took issue. Some did so silently, conveying their discomfort in their body language. Others did so vocally, pointing back to Eden as a model of marriage as partnership.

This tension over women’s roles also manifested itself in discussions about where we saw the Genesis 1-2 text calling couples today. Because our fellowship’s tradition is to exclude women from any activity that might be labeled “leadership,” it becomes more difficult to define arenas of cooperative kingdom participation for husbands and wives. When discussion turned toward a husband and wife’s vocational calling today, it was difficult for the discernment group participants to think beyond the traditional ministry roles for men and women.¹⁰¹ Ms. B exemplified this by alluding to the wife’s primary role as encompassing raising children, caring for the home, and providing behind the scenes support as a means of freeing the husband to pursue ministry in more formally defined roles.

Ms. P, who has extensive, ongoing contact with Christians and congregations in widely diverse cultures all over the world stated “in some churches, men refuse to serve communion because that is ‘woman’s work.’” This opened up the question of what defines leadership and what defines service, and how does that apply to our vocational

¹⁰¹ See chapter 1, specifically, p. 14-15.

calling in marriage? Again, the body language of several in the group indicated apprehension and discomfort in broaching this topic.

In the third session, I briefly returned to the topic of what defines leadership and what defines service and addressed the tension in the last session. The dialogue still appeared to be uncomfortable and divided, but the group recognized the importance of the topic to our conversation. Ms. T, who missed the previous session due to sickness, is a very visible and active leader in the congregation, but she is also deeply traditional. When I suggested that women might be able to do more than we have traditionally allowed them to, Ms. T said, “Are you suggesting that we let women preach? If you are, I need to take you out in the hall and have a talk with you.” After calming her fears that I was not advocating that kind of move for Smyrna, we returned to the conversation at hand, but did not come up with any strong consensus.

The greatest blessing of the discernment group process was the unity in diversity that emerged in the final theological statement. In spite of the tensions that arose throughout the first five sessions, the overarching goal of moving the church forward theologically in regard to our belief and practice of marriage always remained at the forefront.

Editing the Final Document

The Sunday after the fifth session, I presented a first draft of the final theological statement to the discernment group participants.¹⁰² Because of the discernment group’s own initial difficulty in utilizing the term “vocational” in a theological sense, I changed

¹⁰² See Appendix H.

the title to “God’s Call for Married Couples at the Smyrna Church of Christ.”¹⁰³ I elected to write the statement as four movements. The one-paragraph movements were intended to present the past reality of Eden, the current reality of our sinful fallen nature, the hope we have in Christ, and how those things come together in a covenant Christian marriage relationship.

In the sixth session, after dwelling in the Word and prayer, I read the first draft of the theology statement aloud, explained my rationale for the four-movement structure, and then opened the floor to discussion. The discernment group unanimously approved of the four-movement design and the essential content of the statement. The discussion that followed focused on readability and a few contextual issues.

Mr. C began the discussion by noting specific wording that he felt would be confusing to the larger congregation who did not go through the in-depth textual study which the discernment group had shared in over the last five weeks. In the first movement, the word “holistic” was deemed awkward. In the second movement, everyone felt the phrase “a host of other evils associated with a cursed existence” did not flow and was too ambiguous. “Ministry of Reconciliation” was changed to “reconciliation” in the third movement because the group felt the former sounded too much like a formal ministry program rather than a theological call. Other technical changes included changing some past tense phrasing to active present tense, and substituting, restructuring or eliminating words, phrases, and sentences to avoid repetition and to give greater clarity. As a final step, the group suggested adding “scripture tags” to give specific

¹⁰³ This title was later revised to “God’s Call for Husbands and Wives at the Smyrna Church of Christ.” The discernment group felt this change gave a specific call to each spouse so that the burden of fulfilling the theological directive did not fall on one spouse.

scriptural references to the various statements, concepts, and ideas that flowed throughout the document.

Several questions arose regarding the contextual nature of the theology statement. In the first movement, the statement, “Husband and wife were created with a distinct purpose, to work together in God’s kingdom, participating with God by caring for creation and procreating,” was especially troublesome for Ms. J, who felt connecting procreation to a couple’s distinct purpose and function in God’s kingdom would seem cold and condemning to couples who were not able to reproduce. Other ladies in the group concurred. Ms. R also brought up cases of marriages in which one or both spouses had children from a previous relationship and as a couple did not wish to have more children. This sparked a lively discussion, with the group trying to discern how to be true to scripture without being offensive to a specific segment of the congregation.

In the second movement, Mr. E felt the phrase “humanity chose to rebel against God” might be offensive to younger generations, and that they might quit reading the theology statement when they came to that phrase, feeling the tone of the statement to be too condescending and negative. After some discussion, the group arrived at a consensus on more neutral language that still conveyed humanity’s responsibility before God for our current condition. The group felt that, although we softened the language of the first sentence, we still needed to spell out some of the specific ramifications of our fallen nature. Thus, in spite of its potential negative connotation, the phrase, “isolation, shame, fear, guilt, blame, loss of communication, and brokenness,” was left intact.

In the third movement, Mr. I advocated adding the idea of husbands and wives jointly seeking holiness as foundational to a proper understanding of Christian marriage.

The pursuit of mutual holiness over personal happiness in marriage was discussed at various times throughout the previous five sessions, but was never vocalized as something that needed to specifically be added to the concepts that informed the final document. The entire group agreed that this concept should be included and that Mr. I found the best place to insert this concept in the third movement.

Participants also felt the statement was weak in advocating a greater sense of mission and purpose in marriage. Some minor tweaks were discussed to address this, but a more fully realized concept of mission and purpose was not discerned before our time ran out.

At the end of the sixth session, we left with significant improvement to the final document, but also with the recognition that we still needed to prayerfully reflect on it. In the post-session email conversation, two more notable changes occurred. At Ms. U's suggestion, I changed "husband and wife" to "Adam and Eve" in the first movement, third sentence. This change got rid of the awkwardness of how to connect procreating to the mission of marriage by tying the ordinance directly to the ones to whom God gave the command.

The second post-session change was an expansion of the fourth movement. After the sixth session, Mr. C noted we had not fully incorporated the "helper suitable for him" concept into the statement. I agreed that the concept needed to be fleshed out, but felt the word "helper" was a loaded and subjective term in our twenty-first century context. So, I opted to use the "one flesh" reference to preserve the divine mystery of marriage, and the phrase "a common unity and a common purpose" rather than "helper" to indicate an indispensable companion who brings completeness. The last sentence of the fourth

movement, “We believe God is calling us as a church family to teach and live out this gospel of reconciliation as a path for husbands and wives to pursue together,” was added to give a much more direct call and commission for Smyrna as a church family. While the discernment group did not believe we could or should attempt to give a list of specific ways for couples to participate in the ministry of reconciliation, we felt we could use the fourth movement to make the whole statement more imperative and to create a level of expectation that communicates, “If we believe this is where God is calling us, then we need to expect couples to embrace and participate in this as a part of who we are as married couples at the Smyrna Church of Christ.” This change satisfied the desire for the final statement to have a clearer calling for purpose and mission in marriage. A finalized version of the statement was emailed to the discernment group the Saturday after the sixth session.¹⁰⁴ The team was reminded that the elders would receive a copy the following morning.

Meeting With the Elders

I provided the eldership with the discernment team’s finalized version of the theology statement the Sunday morning following the sixth session. The next evening, I met with the elders to begin receiving their feedback on the theology statement. Robert Mullins, an elder for over thirty years at Smyrna and a participant with the discernment team, led the meeting. All nine elders were present.

Initially, I questioned my decision to have Robert lead the meeting rather than doing it myself due to slow pace Robert used to get to the finalized statement. However, in hindsight having Robert lead the meeting was the correct choice. Robert understands

¹⁰⁴ See Appendix I.

the eldership and how they take in and process information. He recognized that if he went straight to the finalized statement without first defining terms and explaining the work that went into a one-page statement, the rest of the eldership would have interacted with it in a totally different manner.

Robert shared the depth of experience that was present within the discernment team. He presented the session outlines and reflection questions given to the discernment group. He shared the texts we studied and how the discernment group encountered those texts. He shared the visual flow chart of the finalized theology that informed the final document.¹⁰⁵

He concluded his portion of the meeting by opening the floor to questions, and then asked the eldership for their feedback.

At first, I was concerned that the eldership did not share my view of the ramifications of this theological statement to the health of marriages at the Smyrna church. Their first few comments seemed to either be short cliché statements to affirm the discernment group's work, or comments that seemed to follow paths with no real long-term bearing on the theology statement or on marriages at Smyrna. However, as the discussion continued, all of the elders expressed a strong affirmation for the theological statement's importance to the congregation. They also commended the discernment group for keeping the statement clearly within the framework of Smyrna's vision and values statements. The meeting concluded with the elders stating that they wanted us to take a deliberate path toward presenting the final document to the congregation and

¹⁰⁵ See Appendix J. Other than fielding some questions at the end of the meeting, this is the only part of the meeting in which Robert asked me to be an active participant rather than a non-participatory observer. Since I led the discernment sessions and created the visual flow chart, he felt I could better explain it to the rest of the eldership.

explaining to the church family how it should impact marriages and ministries at Smyrna. However, they cautioned us against rushing the process for the sake of initial momentum that could compromise long term effectiveness.

Seventh Session With the Discernment Group and the Elders

The final meeting of the project brought together the eldership and the discernment team. The elders' wives were also invited to attend. Six of the nine elders and their spouses attended. After dwelling in the Word and prayer, the discernment group began discussing their impressions of the discernment process and of the final product. The elders asked questions and expressed their initial reactions to the theology statement. When asked how the discernment group felt about the final statement, Mr. S noted that it was forward reaching. Ms. H said it had already caused her and her husband to reassess their marriage. Other similar comments flowed quickly and freely from the discernment group participants.

At the end of the seventh session, conversation turned toward implementation. The group shared thoughts and ideas on how they saw the theology statement shaping the language, actions, and ministries of the congregation. The discernment team put a strong emphasis on moving toward a relational view of marriage enrichment for the congregation rather than a programmatic approach. The elders expressed thanks to the discernment group for their work.

Discernment Group's Evaluation

Given the observed challenges noted above, many of the discernment group's question sets revealed a contemplative, reflective approach to this project. For most, the final set of questions revealed a deeper desire for scriptural understanding of and participation in Christian marriage than was revealed by the first question set.

Convergences

Two significant convergences emerged from the question sets. First, a strong emphasis was put on the importance of focusing on relationship, both relationship between spouses as well as how a couple's relationship with God informs their relationship with each other. In virtually every question set for all six sessions, participants consistently placed relationship over any other concept. The discernment group participants felt we had lost a holistic view of marriage as a relationship with both one's mate and with God as presented in the past reality of Eden. The concept of "one flesh" was repeatedly mentioned, always being tied to God's role in the relationship.

Both in the sessions and in answering the question sets, participants noted our tradition and history reveal a push toward being programmatic over being relational. While the implementation of programs is well intended, group participants saw the reliance upon quick-fix marriage ministry programs to be harmful to cultivating a strong theological foundation. Mr. G expressed the impossibility of experiencing God's grace, forgiveness, and healing within the marriage relationship if a programmatic approach supersedes a relational system that includes God and mate as an inseparable whole. Mr. C said he was in the process of reassessing how he views his participation in the physical expressions of ministry at Smryna and whether or not he sees his wife as an active participant with him in those ministries.

The second major convergence was recognition of a sense of purpose in God's kingdom specific to the calling of marriage. On the whole, many Christian couples have lost a sense of purpose within their marriage, seeing marriage as a civil arrangement rather than a fully-engaged, defining, vocational calling. The discernment group acknowledged that as a congregation, we have not done a good job of leading couples toward viewing marriage as an intentional, joint participation in ministry. Ms. H wrote "...if we want to be a congregation known for building [and] strengthening marriages it just needs to become our focus." She elaborated, saying she recognized her own need to renew her teaching with her children about marriage as an intentional relationship for kingdom purpose. She strongly advocated "a change in focus for our congregation [toward preaching and teaching marriage as a kingdom-oriented relationship]," believing "it would make a difference [in the life of the Smyrna church]!"

Divergences

There was a notable divergence in the way participants read scripture. Some took each passage in its individual context. Others immediately read other texts or traditions into the passage being considered to move to a pre-conceived meaning. Examples included, Mr. C and Ms. N inferred the "us" in Genesis 1:26 to be a reference to the Trinity, and Ms. R and Ms. D reading the concept of "helper" in Genesis 2:18 through the lens of overarching tradition within the Churches of Christ fellowship and specifically tradition within the Smyrna congregation. Ms. L spoke of the headship of a husband when commenting on the overview presented in Genesis 1:1-2:3, before the concept of "a helper" was even introduced in 2:18.

The way scripture was read was, to some extent, also manifested as a generational divergence.¹⁰⁶ The divide was obvious both in class interactions and in written responses, as each generation had definitive views of what defines Christian marriage. Although a strong personality herself, Ms. B consistently spoke in terms of submission and child rearing as the primary calling for females in marriage, whereas her younger counterparts spoke of partnership, equality, and self-actualization as mutual pursuits. Mr. A spoke of clear and obvious separation from one's parents as a thing of "his day" that he no longer sees as prevalent. Ms. F had to laugh at his statement as she and her husband recently sold their home to move their family in with her parents, seeing getting out of debt as more important to their family than having their own home away from parents. At times, participants would express statements like "I don't understand how you young folks think today," or "We just don't do things that way anymore." While obviously generationally divided, there was no hostility in how participants expressed themselves. However, there were frequent comments and questions about expressions of commitment to the marriage covenant and how it has been displayed over the years.

Eldership's Evaluation

The primary focus of the eldership's evaluation was whether or not the theology statement produced by the discernment group accurately adhered to and reflected scripture. Their belief that the discernment group had achieved this goal was most succinctly summed up by Bill Townes' answer to the fifth question from the elders' question set, "Do you see this theology shaping us as a congregation?" Bill's response

¹⁰⁶ Although there were occasional exceptions, on the whole, the Generation Xer's (born 1963 to 1983) and the Millennials (born 1983 to 2003) had a different view of marriage than the Baby Boomers (born 1943 to 1963) and the Silent Generation (born 1923 to 1943).

was simply, “How can it not? The more we incorporate scripture into our lives, the closer to God and the better off we will be.” This statement echoed Robert Mullins sentiment that the elders wanted to “let [the theology statement] be/ reflect the teachings of the Bible” and not become “[an additional] document/ addendum/ creed to be followed.”

The elders also focused on the depth and breadth of the effect the theology statement could potentially have on the congregation. Robert Walden noted the theology statement was a starting point for “[establishing] a basic foundation and expectation for our marriages” that is strongly “[supported] by scripture.” Bill Davis said, “I see us using this statement as a guideline for our ministries to develop better ways of incorporating both husband and wife into ministry service.” Both in writing and verbal conversations, the elders spoke of the effects of the theology statement on Bible classes at all age levels, preaching, pre-marital counseling, and how the statement could shape new ministry initiatives such as a mentoring ministry.

Another primary concern for the eldership was how to implement the theology statement into the life of the congregation in a way that is relevant and ongoing. As noted above, the elders were cautious about rushing into any action without first carefully and prayerfully thinking it through. Though they wanted the implementation to proceed in a well thought out manner, James Watson commented that he wished the discernment group’s work had been started much sooner so that the theology statement could already be integrated into the life and ministries of the congregation.

In response to the sixth question in the elders’ question set, “Do you see this theology shaping or reshaping your own marriage?” some of the elders revealed a generational bias by stating that they had been married too long to make any significant

changes in their relationship with their spouse. This was not viewed as a negative commentary on the theology statement, but rather as an acknowledgement that the elders were living out the theology statement before it was ever articulated for this project. As Bill Davis wrote, “We have been married over 59 years and are not likely to make a lot of changes; however, we have already incorporated many of the principles contained in the statement.”

Expected and Unexpected Emergences

I expected the discernment group to focus on relationship over programmatic approaches. I also expected a strong emphasis on purpose in marriage. In my experience working in Smyrna’s marriage ministry over the last several years, relationships that focus on mutual holiness and claiming a distinct, godly purpose in marriage are strongly perceived needs within the congregation. The congregation does not typically vocalize relationship and purpose as needs in marriage, but they do vocalize their disappointment at programmatic fixes that focus on personal happiness over mutual holiness.¹⁰⁷ I also fully expected the eldership’s focus to be on adherence to scripture and an aversion to something that might be perceived as a creedal statement.

While the majority of the process went as expected, one very notable gap appeared. Both in conversation within the sessions and in the participants’ and elders’

¹⁰⁷ Mark Frost, minister of the Trenton Church of Christ in Trenton, MI expressed a similar sentiment at his congregation. He posted the following on the Christian Education Association Forum board: “I am looking for a resource on the theology of marriage. I’m not looking for ‘biblical principles for a happy marriage,’ but something that deals with the biblical foundations of marriage-why God created us male and female, how marriage reflects the relational aspect of God’s nature, etc. Any good recommendations?” (accessed at www.christianeducator.org, October 4, 2010) Brother Frost’s comment and ensuing pursuit accurately reflects Smyrna’s frustration at similar approaches in the past.

answers to the question sets, there was almost no mention of love as a component of marriage. Love only came up two times. The first time it came up in a brief conversation regarding Ms. J's answer to the fourth question of the first question set. In this instance, the conversation was addressing free choice and whether or not one can truly love in the absence of free choice. The second time was in the fifth session as part of a list of attributes Christian couples will reflect through their participation in the ministry of reconciliation. In both instances, only a minimal amount of time was devoted to the discussion.

At first glance, the absence of an in-depth conversation on love might seem to be a huge gap when discerning a theology regarding marriage. However, the impact of this gap is greatly minimized by the context of the project and the context of the congregation. The focus of the project was not to define love within a marriage relationship. The focus was on a couple's joint pursuit of holiness through selfless service to God, to each other, and to their surrounding community. Over the last several years the marriage ministry at Smyrna has put a strong emphasis on love manifesting itself as the pursuit of holiness and selfless service. Those participating in the discernment group have both the teaching and the wisdom not to confuse mature Christian love with fleeting romanticism.¹⁰⁸

Conclusion

¹⁰⁸ As Thomas notes, "romantic love, which is so celebrated in movies, songs, and cheap paperbacks, was virtually unknown to the ancients...Romantic love has no elasticity to it. It can never be stretched; it simply shatters. Mature love, the kind demanded of a good marriage, *must* stretch...This is the reality of the human heart, that inevitability of two sinful people pledging to live together, with all their faults, for the rest of their lives" (Thomas, *Sacred Marriage*, p. 13, 15-16).

Although only one elder, Robert Mullins, participated in the five week study, in the discernment process, and in the crafting of the final statement, the whole eldership acknowledged the theology statement as an important step for Smyrna to realize a better way of teaching about, preaching about, ministering to, and experiencing marriage.

Additionally, all the participants and the eldership now see greater benefit to the spiritual discipline of group discernment as a means of articulating and contextualizing theology for the Smyrna congregation.

CHAPTER 5

POSTULATION OF THE EFFECTS OF A VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE ON THE TEACHINGS AND PRAXIS OF MARRIAGE AT THE SMYRNA CHURCH OF CHRIST

Chapter 4 detailed the results of the project from the three sources of triangulation—my personal perspective, the question sets from the discernment group participants, and the question sets from the eldership. This chapter will further analyze the results and postulate on the ramifications of the theology statement on the ongoing teachings and praxis at the Smyrna congregation. Attention will be given to theological, ecclesiological, and personal implications of the project, seeking avenues to focus on marriage as a holistic experience that more fully embraces life in God.

Trustworthiness of the Project

The applicability, dependability, and credibility of the project were greatly enhanced by the diversity of the discernment group. Because the participants represented a widely diverse generational, socio-economic, and (to a lesser degree) ethnic sampling, each subset had a voice in the formation of the final theological statement. Although no statement can hope to cover every possible contingency, the participants can champion the soundness of the final product as a valid identity statement for the Smyrna Church of Christ.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ In the sixth session while editing the final document, when the debate over tying procreation to a husband and wife's role in the kingdom of God arose, Mr. C noted that scripture itself does not attempt to

Although I had definitive views on where I wanted the project to take the discernment group, the eldership, and ultimately the entire congregation in their understanding of marriage as a vocational pursuit, I am confident that I did not allow those biases to overshadow the goal of the project. Mr. C reaffirmed my belief that I was not unduly manipulating the project toward any particular outcome. After the sixth session, Mr. C commented that he “thought it was great that so many people could work together to produce something like we did.” He also said he was impressed that I was “very willing to make changes to what I first proposed” because “some people get very defensive when you want to change something they have put down on paper.”¹¹⁰

The Effects of the Project Personally, on the Discernment Group, and on the Eldership

If the discernment group believes the theology statement we produced is capable of facilitating change for the congregation, we must first be willing to allow it to change each of us personally and (for those who are married) as a couple. On a personal level, this was a very challenging process. As my wife Lisa and I examined our own relationship, we discovered that we initially had difficulty identifying our own joint participation in the Kingdom of God. Discussions about personality types and stage of life became important considerations. Lisa is a quiet, introverted personality. I am an

address every possible scenario or contingency. The necessity of speaking in general terms does not invalidate the final product or lessen its viability to establish ecclesiological identity.

¹¹⁰ The Hawthorne Effect is the postulation that participants will change their investment in a project in order to help the researcher succeed. I do not believe the Hawthorne Effect significantly affected the participation in or outcome of this project. While I believe the eldership and the discernment team members did desire to see me succeed, their investment was more strongly tied to the goal of the project than to the specific methodology used to get there or my personal involvement. Also, participants were more than willing to hold me accountable and responsible for achieving the goals of the project over and above personal interest in a grade for the project. As Sensing notes, within the context of a ministry project “most participants are chosen because they believe in the project, want the project to succeed, and subsequently, forget about the research side of the equation” (Sensing, 60). This proved true for this project.

extrovert, and a part of the paid staff. By way of my nature and profession, I am expected to be in the forefront of congregational life. Because I am typically teaching, preaching, or otherwise leading in a public way, it is difficult for Lisa and me to find specific ministries that we share in a visibly equal way. However, as we continued to evaluate our roles, we recognized that we truly do complement each other. Although Lisa is a “behind the scenes person,” eschewing any kind of public attention, I rarely teach or preach a single lesson, especially on marriage, without her input and influence. Theologically, academically, and physically, Lisa supports everything I do in ministry. She truly is “a helper” in every sense of an indispensable companion.

Another factor that determined how Lisa and I received this theology is our current stage of life. Lisa is a stay-at-home mom, and we have three young children. As much as we talk about other ministry venues, her primary role now is to care for our eight-year-old, six-year-old, and three-year-old children. As the children grow and become more independent and self-sufficient, we expect more ministry possibilities to open up for us, but now our primary joint participation is focused on leading our children to know the Lord and doing our best to model a healthy, Christ-centered marriage for them. We recognize that this can be used as an excuse or justification to not fulfill the theology statement produced by the discernment group, so we are now constantly on guard that what we are instilling in our children is servant-focused and not something that isolates our marriage or our family from the larger church family and from the community in which we live.

The most profound effect of the theology statement on the discernment group appeared to be acknowledging the call to joint participation for husbands and wives. At

the beginning of the project, most participants held to the traditional pattern of ministry that separated spouses through segregated ministry roles. The view of “helper” did not entail a joint call, but was relegated to a hierarchal support system. However, by the fifth discernment session, during the second week of studying from the 2 Corinthians 5 text, Mr. C stated he could no longer view the call to the ministry of reconciliation as an individual pursuit if he and his wife were going to be true to God’s calling for them as a couple. The rest of the discernment group affirmed this position.

For most of the eldership, their personal response to the theology statement revealed a generational bias as noted in chapter 4. While they embraced the need for such a statement for the teaching and praxis of the congregation, they did not seem deeply moved on a personal level. Again, this was not viewed as a negative commentary on the theology statement, as they are already living it out in their daily walk with Christ. James Watson said the theology statement did remind him and his wife to “work harder to be that person God wants us to be in marriage.” Other elders concurred with the sentiment, recognizing that the older generations must model marriage as joint participation in the Kingdom of God to younger couples. Some admitted they did not exactly know how to do that. But, they were constantly trying, and the theology statement provided a good reference point from which to start.

The Project Within Smyrna’s Context

The context of the congregation defines the effectiveness of the project and its implications and implementation into the life of the church. There are three key factors which will shape how this project was received and will continue to be utilized. First, it

can often be difficult to affect change in a congregation like Smyrna that is large, has a rich, deep tradition and history, and is in a place of relative comfort and peace. While virtually everyone in the congregation will readily accept the theological premise of the final statement, letting that theology affect the ecclesiology will likely take a much stronger effort. The ministers, elders, and ministry leaders realize that a large ship turns slowly. Therefore, patience will be a necessity.

Second, it is a blessing that Smyrna is a generationally diverse congregation, but regrettably that can also lead to Smyrna being a segmented congregation. The current ministry structure, as detailed in chapter 1, heavily segments ages and at times genders. This segregation usually leads to new ministry innovations affecting only one small portion of the congregation rather than moving the entire congregation toward a holistic identity based on the theology of the ministry innovation.¹¹¹

Third, if the theology statement is embraced as an identity statement for the congregation, it will call for change in both personal and congregational beliefs and practices, and change can be scary for many people. Peter L. Steinke reminds us that change often creates pain and discomfort, which leads to resistance. Steinke goes on to say you can never make only one change; change arouses “survival instincts” within those called on to do something different; change grows—meaningful change cannot remain small and insignificant, and “no emotional system will change unless people in

¹¹¹ The lack of generational crossover has been abundantly clear in various areas of the marriage ministry over the years. Smyrna conducts bi-annual marriage retreats and older couples are regularly invited to participate. Common responses include statements like, “We are too old for that kind of thing,” and “If we do not have it figured out after forty years of marriage, we never will.” In spite of constant advertising and announcements that the classes are opened to all ages, marriage classes are often assumed to be for young couples only. Invitations to older couples to participate as examples and mentors in various marriage ministry initiatives are often met with a polite but adamant decline.

the system change how they function with one another.”¹¹² To challenge the status quo is sometimes necessary for spiritual growth, but we should expect “growing pains.”

Introducing the Theology Statement to the Congregation

Given the observations above, it will be crucial to introduce the theology statement produced by this project in a way that will form identity before seeking to change ministry structure or practices. Only then can we effectively move toward structuring ministry initiatives in ways that will allow for generational inclusiveness, congregational ownership of the identity produced, and sharing a common story based on scripture. Steinke notes, “Resistance to the new is stronger if it is less familiar.”¹¹³ Hence, in conversations with the eldership after the conclusion of the project, it was decided the best way to introduce the theology statement to the congregation would be through a series of sermons on Sunday morning. This method was chosen because the teaching could be delivered to a larger number of congregants than through a Bible class.¹¹⁴

Even though the discernment group recognized it was articulating theology for a specific segment of the congregation, and a sermon series on marriage does not directly address the single members of the audience, those who are not married still share in the theology as an identity statement for the congregation.¹¹⁵ For those who are widowed,

¹¹² Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous No Matter What* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), 78-80.

¹¹³ Steinke, 80.

¹¹⁴ See footnote no. 131 for part of the rationale behind this decision.

¹¹⁵ Singles sharing in the identity statement presupposes that those single, either by choice or by circumstance, are handling their current position in life in a God-centered, holy manner. It is understood that those who are still in the midst of a bitter divorce or overwhelming grief may not yet be in a position to identify with the theology statement. It is the leadership at Smyrna’s prayer that all individuals will come to

they can stand as powerful examples of “until death do we part.” At Smyrna, we have widows and widowers who stood by their mates through years of degenerating health, providing powerful examples of loving perseverance and patience. They can pass on to other couples the importance of selfless, servant-oriented relationships. We have widows and widowers who lost their mates through sudden, tragic circumstances. They can help other couples recognize how precious one’s time with his or her mate can be. We have widows and widowers who weathered storms of conflict in their marriages, who can now witness to other couples the commitment that seems to be lacking in so many marriages today.

How will those who are divorced find participation in a theology statement about marriage? First, it should be noted that most who have gone through a divorce do not believe that it was a good thing, either for that individual personally, for their former mate, for their family, or for the church body.¹¹⁶ From the vantage of having lived through the pain of a broken covenant relationship, the divorced person stands in a unique position to counsel those who are engaged. The divorced person can warn married couples to not go down paths that will destroy their marriage. Through the tragedy of being a part of something God hates, they can show the grace, forgiveness, and goodness of God to those married couples in need of healing. Out of the pain of divorce, God can still work for the good of marriages at Smyrna.

a desire to embrace and do their part to practice theology that is good for the body as a whole, even if that theology is more directly centered on another “part” of the body.

¹¹⁶ Someone may point to a divorce that allowed someone to escape a dangerous situation (abuse, addiction, etc.) as a positive thing. However, those who escaped the destructive relationship can still recognize and acknowledge that it would have been far better to have had a healthy marriage that functioned in a godly, loving way and enhanced the lives of both spouses.

Even those dedicated to sacred singleness can embrace the theology as an identity statement that complements their own choice for kingdom service. Pope John Paul II addresses the complementary nature of marriage and sacred singleness in forming ecclesiological identity.

[In Matthew 19, Christ] did not reply: “It is advantageous to marry” or “It is not advantageous to marry.” The question of continence for the kingdom of heaven is not set in opposition to marriage, nor is it based on a negative judgment about the importance of marriage...[Christ] had appealed to the “beginning,” that is, to the mystery of creation, thus indicating the first and fundamental source of the value of marriage...[In regard to abstinence] Christ appeals to another principle. It is not because “it is not advantageous to marry,” nor because of the supposedly negative value of marriage that continence is observed by those who make such a choice “for the kingdom of heaven” in their lives, but in view of the particular value which is connected with this choice and which one must discover and welcome as one’s own vocation.¹¹⁷

Each life station has a specific role to play within the body of Christ, and each should affirm the other’s significance to the health of the church body rather than try to position one choice as better or more normal than the other.¹¹⁸

Effects of the Theology Statement on the Congregation

In the seventh session, there was a strong sentiment among the elders and the discernment team that we stood in a precarious position. We all agreed on the validity, the power, and the need for the theology statement to enact positive change in marriages within the Smyrna congregation. But we also all recognized how easily the theology

¹¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, page 413-414.

¹¹⁸ It is not within the scope of this project to discern and articulate a theology of sacred singleness. However, attention does need to be given to the predisposition many have to pressure young people toward marriage over sacred singleness, giving the impression that not marrying is abnormal or less desirable. Jeff Childers rightly pointed out that, in contrast to Catholic theology which regards celibacy for the sake of the kingdom as a higher calling, in Protestant churches, classes for post-college singles often give the impression of being a “cattle call for losers that we throw into a room hoping some of them will get lucky enough to match up and get married.” (Comment written in the margin of my “The Sacrament of Marriage and the Celibacy of the Priesthood in the Catholic Church” paper, submitted June 9, 2009 for the class Christian Spiritual Formation, Abilene Christian University, June 8-12, 2009.)

statement could be quickly minimized and lose any impact or influence for the good of the congregation. While a sermon series to introduce the theology statement to the congregation will be a good thing, it will be critical to think beyond the simple dissemination of the information.

In the November ministry leaders' meeting, the eldership introduced their intent to put emphasis on three or four various ministries each year, and relate those ministries to the church's overall Vision and Values framework. At this meeting, I volunteered to lead the first initiative as a focus on the marriage ministry, and particularly on the theology statement produced by the discernment team. This route for introducing the theology statement certainly does not guarantee a long-term emphasis or impact, but it does give an opportunity for a stronger introduction to the congregation. It also allows the theology statement to be tied into the overall ecclesiology of the congregation in a more prominent way.¹¹⁹

After the theology statement is introduced to the congregation and the initial proposal outlined in Appendix K is completed, the theology will be kept in front of the congregation through church publications, classes, and special events. Also, a critical review of past and present Bible class curriculum should be conducted to determine strengths and weaknesses in approaches to the theological position of the statement taken thus far, as well as to ascertain new ways to teach the theology.

The concept of establishing identity through teaching is important, but for the theology statement to become fully ingrained into the life of the congregation, the knowledge will have to translate into regular practice. How does that occur? In the fourth

¹¹⁹ See Appendix K for an outline of the proposed introduction initiative. This proposal was shared with Robert Mullins, the elder who works with Smyrna's marriage ministry, on Wednesday, November 23, 2010. At Robert's direction, the marriage ministry began to move forward with carrying out the proposal.

movement of the theology statement, the discernment team intentionally did not spell out specific tasks, knowing that each couple would have to find their own path to joint kingdom participation. However, in the third movement, a number of general categories were articulated: jointly seeking holiness; living lives of love, forgiveness, grace, healing, restoration, submission, sacrificial living; and kingdom participation within the marriage, church, and community, for the purpose of reclaiming the relationship God established at creation, offering hope to others, and seeking to reconcile the world back to God. Though each couple will interpret their call to participate differently, and it is not possible to provide a unique path for each couple, it still behooves the congregation to provide some specific ministries in which couples can participate. It is my prayer that these ministries will not become a programmatic end to this theology's influence in the congregation, but rather a springboard for constant new ministry initiatives for husband and wives.

The first step in accomplishing this task is a careful review of the existing ministries. Initially, it would be more beneficial for the congregation to work within the framework of existing ministries. As Steinke points out, "resistance to change is less likely if learning adds facts or meaning that do not disturb what is already known."¹²⁰ By starting with existing ministries, we can incorporate the disorienting unfamiliar into the comfortably familiar. So, each ministry will be reviewed for current and potential avenues for husbands and wives to participate together. The purpose is not to take over viable ministries led by capable people in order to force a ministry to fit into a preconceived mold for marriage ministry, but rather as a means of helping ministry leaders recognize and expand on new venues of participation in their respective ministries. It is not expected that every ministry at Smyrna will provide a practical means

¹²⁰ Steinke, 80.

for husbands and wives to have joint participation in the Kingdom of God. However, the majority of ministries at Smyrna have never considered the paths available for a couple's joint participation.

Ultimately, this review will first produce changes in the marriage ministry's established initiatives. The biannual marriage retreats should reflect a more centered theological component. Pre-marital counseling can be expanded to include a session on a couple's joint participation in the Kingdom of God. Smyrna runs some type of marriage enrichment class every quarter, so this theological statement will provide a greater focus for those classes, allowing participants to help discern joint participation options in ways that intersect with the ongoing life of the congregation.

Outside of the established marriage ministry, the theology should have a profound impact on the men's ministry and women's ministry. While those ministries serve a needed function, the theological statement should help the ministry leaders keep those ministries from becoming isolated. Even in their segregation, the men's and women's ministries can facilitate a healthy theology of joint Kingdom participation in marriage. The theology statement can help the ministry leaders better focus lessons on roles in marriage, and potentially even plan complimentary classes that will facilitate husbands and wives actively participating together in resurrection living outside the classroom.

The Young at Heart ministry for the church's senior citizens provides an ideal place for asking older members to help mentor younger couples, helping those couples understand how to put the theology into daily practice. Classes for children and teens provide venues to teach a vocational theology of marriage so the youth can grow up hearing that marriage is about joint participation in God's Kingdom. The missions

ministry offers multiple ways for couples to actively take part in spreading the gospel together. The LIFE Groups (small groups) ministry gives more intimate settings for couples to encourage each other to live out the call of the theology statement and to share ideas for non-institutionally driven means for husbands and wives to minister together. These are just a few examples of the potential changes that could occur within already established ministries.

Once existing ministries have been reviewed and the theology more fully incorporated where possible, we can move toward considering new ministry possibilities. Given the discernment group's focus on relationship and the congregation's resistance to intergenerational ministry, the discernment group and eldership both have suggested a primary focus on developing a mentoring ministry. Using a friendship model, the mentoring ministry would function on two levels: 1) strengthening marriages; and 2) providing competent, empathetic responses to marriage crises. The first part, strengthening marriages, is based loosely on Dr. Ed Gray's *Marriage Mentoring: 12 Conversations* program, and this aspect of the ministry is intended to be "a supportive friendship, the power of a shared life and journey. [This method of] mentoring is not meant to be counseling, taking sides, fixing couples, or parenting couples."¹²¹ Although the couples participating will go through training to prepare for this ministry, the friendship model was chosen to avoid the stigma of mentor couples feeling the need to be perfect in their own marriages or feeling the need to have some professional experience or advanced education to qualify. The second dimension of the mentoring ministry,

¹²¹ Dr. Ed Gray, LMFT, *Marriage Mentoring: 12 Conversations*, accessed at www.12conversations.com/topics, October 22, 2010.

providing competent, empathetic responses to marriage crises, is a need vocalized by the eldership multiple times over the past five years.¹²²

Hopefully, over time more ministries at Smyrna will align their structures and functions to incorporate the theology statement. Also, new ministries and new initiatives growing out of the theology statement should constantly be encouraged and facilitated.

Ministry Insights

This project produced a number of insights that will shape my ministry. The use of a discernment team in producing the vocational theology of marriage allowed me to have a greater trust in my brothers and sisters in Christ. My default method of operation is to do as much as I possibly can by myself, and not have to depend on anyone. The success or failure of this project depended on twenty-two other individuals. If they had failed to respond accordingly, then the project could not have achieved its goal. This project forced me to trust others, giving me a stronger connection in the church body at Smyrna.

The discernment group gave me a better understanding of the diversity present at Smyrna. I intentionally chose a group of individuals representing multiple life experiences, thinking I knew these people well. In the sessions, I learned how little I really know. Everything from the stigma of divorce to the pain of infertility was revealed in conversations. When the differences were expressed in a person's own words, it helped me to be less critical and less judgmental. Proverbs 14:10, "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy," became a personal mantra for how I

¹²² See Appendix L for an outline of the proposal for the Marriage Mentoring Ministry.

encountered each individual in the discernment group sessions, a practice I hope to carry over into all my relationships.

Yet, out of the discernment group's diversity God brought unity, as evidenced by the final theological statement produced by the group. Though we disagreed, and at times did so adamantly, we always had an atmosphere of love for one another. Giving everyone a voice and understanding each person's rationale (even if we disagreed with his or her position or conclusion) helped us all to better understand the joys and the pains present within the church body.

The most significant ministry insight came in meeting people where they were, as fallen people living in a fallen world. While scripture provides an ideal to strive for, God's Word also acknowledges that God is at work among us in spite of our shortcomings. The same qualities of love, patience, grace, mercy, and forgiveness that God extends to us were freely given throughout this project.

If this project can serve as a microcosm for the whole church body, it would change the way we make decisions, contextualizing different voices through the lens of scripture and learning to better trust our brothers and sisters. It would change the way we hear each other. It would enhance the virtues of love and forgiveness and understanding. And, most significantly, it would allow us to hold each other to a higher calling before condemning each other for not living up to an unachievable ideal.

Conclusion

Just as the eldership's conversations in 1994 were necessary to address the reality of the congregation at that time, this project was necessary for addressing the reality of Smyrna's current context. It would be inaccurate to say that marriages at Smyrna had

totally lost their theological center, but the current teaching and ministry structure do not adequately facilitate a vocational theology of marriage. This project created a theological statement for the Smyrna Church of Christ that calls for congregational unity as a husband and wife jointly participate in the Kingdom of God, while allowing individual couples to minister in ways that acknowledge the diversity within the congregation.

The theological statement produced by the discernment group addresses a recognized need with this congregation. The statement has the potential to change the teachings and praxes of the Smyrna church for generations to come. However, the theological statement produced should be reevaluated periodically. As the contemporary culture and the church culture continue to change, the worst possible response to the need that led to this project would be to allow the theology statement produced by this project to become an inherited theology which may no longer be relevant to the makeup of the Smyrna congregation of the future.

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APPENDIX A: EMAIL REGARDING APRIL 14, 2008 MINISTRY TEAM MEETING

The following is the e-mail correspondence from the elders to the ministers regarding a renewed drive for proactive marriage ministry. Attendees at the meeting included eight elders, five ministers, and one deacon who is active in Smyrna's marriage ministry.

From: WALDENR@bellsouth.net
To: TIM LAVENDER <lavendertravel@hotmail.com>,
Danny Camp <dfcamp@gmail.com>,
JPConway1@yahoo.com,
Rick Chambless <rickchambless@mtscougars.org>
Date: Tue, Apr 8, 2008 at 7:12 PM
Subject: Meeting with the elders

Tim, J.P., Danny, Rick,

The elders, as well as I know that you are also, are very concerned with the problems that many of our couples are having with their marriages. I know that we have probably 2 couples that are so far gone that we cannot keep them together. There are several others that are having severe problems and others that have unstable relationships.

We would like to meet with the ministers next Monday night at 7:00 if this schedule is not in conflict with other things that you already have planned. J.P. I know your schedule is unknown at this time with Beth, but we still need your input. We feel that we need to take some immediate action to try to save our families. The elders think we need some ongoing classes in the future, but maybe soon try to bring in someone that has experience in dealing with strengthening families. If you know of someone that we can bring in to hold a series of lessons or classes be prepared to share this with us. I know that Danny and Gary are having the retreats, and J.P just got finished with a family retreat, and we want to build on the ground work that has been laid. We do feel that we need to follow up with these series quickly.

For the Elders
Robert Walden

APPENDIX B: MARRIAGE INITIATIVE PROPOSALS FOR APRIL 14, 2008
MINISTRY TEAM MEETING

The following document was presented at the Monday, April 14, 2008 meeting regarding marriages in crisis. Its intent was to initiate a proactive response regarding our theology of marriage, rather than reactive anxiety every few years when there were high-profile marital problems. In the two years between the meeting and this project, several of the initiatives became part of congregational life.

Introduction:

At the outset, it is essential that we understand two things. First, the church should do everything within her power to encourage, strengthen, and protect marriage. Solid, godly marriages are the bedrock of godly families, a godly church, and a godly community. If good marriages are not prevalent, we are hindered in our ability as a congregation to evangelize our community.

Second (and perhaps most significant), we cannot force good, godly marriages. We can provide the classes, the tools, the resources, and the encouragement, but ultimately each couple must decide their own level of commitment to marriage and their acceptance of marriage as God-given and as a covenant relationship.

Outline of the problem (at least part of it):

We are struggling against two major oppositions to marriage in our current context. First, we are fighting against the church culture of “putting on our church faces and acting like everything is okay.” Most churches (this one included?) are not perceived as a place that the majority of people can be real about their problems, so for fear of embarrassment, rejection, etc. couples do not reveal their marital conflicts until it is too late.

Second, our culture teaches a very casual, ungodly view of marriage. Marriage is treated like either 1) a business arrangement that the partners stay together as long as things are good, but when the business goes bad they part company as if with no consequences, or 2) if the couple chooses to remain together (due to embarrassment of divorce, Christian obligation, etc.) they treat their marriage the way a man reacts to a neighbor he no longer wishes to interact with, building high fences to keep the other out.

Questions for discussion:

What can be done to improve communication to more quickly identify couples having problems?

How can we use LIFE Groups as a resource to strengthen marriage and identify potential problems?

What should be our protocol for making the elders aware of people we know facing marriage problems?

What is the eldership's procedure for addressing marriage problems—when you hear of it do you go to them or wait for them to come to you?

Suggestions for marriage classes/resources/tools/etc.:

Please note that it will take a while to structure and implement some of these resources, while others can be done immediately.

Bulletin

Add a block to the bulletin titled "Family Matters." This block will be on the front page (very eye catching box across the bottom of Danny and Tim's articles). The block would contain tips, ideas, or other information that would be useful for families. The weekly rotation would be as follows: Marriage (Danny), Teen Parenting (J.P.), Marriage (Rick or Tim), Child Parenting (Kelly), and on months with a fifth Wednesday, Aging Parents (Gary Hickerson). Since the length of the block will vary according to the information presented, Tim and I will adjust our articles to accommodate.

Marriage Retreats

Continuation of the marriage retreats. Gary and I appreciate the support the eldership has given to these marriage enriching/affirming events. In meeting with John Conger, head of the Family and Consumer Sciences Department at Lipscomb, he told me that Smyrna is the only church in our immediate area that provides consistent, ongoing marriage enrichment. In order to maximize the effectiveness of the retreats for those who need them, we would like for the elders and ministers to be proactive in directing troubled couples to Gary or me to get them on the list for the retreats. Because the retreats are set up to use a smaller group dynamic, the sooner we know someone needs a spot, the better.

Pulpit

A sermon series (two to four weeks on Sunday morning) focusing on the covenant nature of marriage and the cultural enemies of marriage.

Counseling

Many couples don't use our counseling service because of the embarrassment factor of being seen by church staff or others moving through the building during the day. Move the counseling to another location (one of the adjacent rental houses, etc.) to give better anonymity to couples here having problems who need the counseling services. This would require the hiring of another secretary to handle the counseling full time, but it would also allow us to expand this service to 5 days a week.

Mentoring program

Have couples with solid marriages who've been married for a long time "adopt" younger couples or couples that are struggling. The specific format would be worked out later, but mentoring couples would model godly marriage, hold the other couple accountable, and generally help them in having a better marriage.

Marriage class

See the next page for information about a class that will begin this fall that is designed to go much deeper than any of the standard marriage classes that we've offered before. We need to add regular marriage components to the teen and college classes. Classes such as True Love Waits are good, but we need to begin teaching the blessing, goodness, and covenant aspects of marriage at a much earlier age.

Honoring marriage

As a congregation, we should make a bigger deal about marriage in general and especially long term marriages. LIFE Groups and/or Bible classes should make it a practice to recognize all anniversaries, and there should be recognition from the pulpit for milestone anniversaries (25th, 35th, 40th, 50th, 60th, etc.), with church sponsored celebrations for couples reaching their 50th, 60th, or (Lord willing) 70th (if anyone makes it past their 70th anniversary, we need to recognize that on a yearly basis!)

Marriage Dynamics Classes¹²³

Groups are self-forming and must have at least four couples and no more than six couples.

Groups must agree to and sign the Marriage Group Covenant form below.

Groups will meet every Wednesday night for August, September, and October unless one of the following situations applies:

- If one spouse cannot attend, the other spouse must go to another class for that week
- If less than three couples are present, the group does not meet that week

Couples can only participate in the Marriage Dynamics class every other quarter.

Groups will be given material in advance to facilitate discussion and there may be occasional “homework” which couples will have to do before class. The intention of the Marriage Dynamics class is for marriage enrichment, but also to provide couples with a safe place to discuss personal and/or problematic marital issues.

Marriage Dynamics Class Covenant

I believe that God created marriage and that a good, godly marriage is a gift from God. I believe that marriage can and should be something wonderful, but I also know that marriage takes work, sacrifice, and selflessness. Because of this, I covenant with this group that I will do the following:

- I will work to the best of my ability to make my marriage the best it can be to the glory of God.
- I will not say or reveal anything that may potentially embarrass my spouse without his/her permission.
- I will be honest and open with this marriage group, even about problems my spouse and I are having in our relationship. I will not cast blame toward my spouse in presenting a problem.
- As a couple, my spouse and I give this marriage group permission to hold us accountable—accountable for doing whatever it takes to improve the state of our marriage from where it is now.
- In the process of discussing marriage issues, I will not take sides in another couple’s disagreement. I will participate in helping other couples explore possible solutions and resolutions to their problems.

I agree to keep a strict confidentiality and not repeat or discuss anything from my marriage group meeting.

¹²³ The title of this was later changed to “Marriage First” to avoid confusion with Joe Beam’s “Dynamic Marriage” curriculum.

APPENDIX C: SMYRNA'S THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE, 2008

Below is the original form of Smyrna's theology of marriage as it was presented to the congregation in 2008.

What We Believe:

We believe that marriage was created by God (Gen. 1:26-2:25), was blessed by Christ (John 2:1-2; Matt. 19:4-6), and is empowered by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:2-3). We believe it is a covenant relationship between husband and wife, and God hates the breaking of covenant in divorce (Mal. 2:10-16). We believe marriage is intended to be a blessing to both husband and wife (Prov. 18:22). We believe that those who marry are to leave their parents' primary care to cleave to their spouses, and godly parents will facilitate rather than frustrate this God-ordained process (Gen. 2:24, Mark 10:6-9). We believe that husband and wife are to love each other in action as well as word (1 Cor. 13:4-8). A husband is to love his wife as Jesus loves the church, and a wife's love for her husband should be a witness of her love for God (Eph. 5:22-33). Wives and husbands are to submit to each other out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:21). We believe that God has not called everyone to marriage, and those who choose to remain single are equally important in the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:10-12).

APPENDIX D: VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT TEAM

Due to confidentiality, the specific participants will not be listed individually. In the main body of the text, participants will be designated as “Mr.” or “Ms.” A, B, C, etc. Adjacent letters should not be assumed to be a couple. The ranges and characteristics below are listed to demonstrate the depth of wisdom and life experience that was present in the discernment group.

- Length of marriages ranged from 5 years to 54 years.
- Married, engaged, and sacred singleness were all represented, as were blended families, widowed, and traditional nuclear families as described in chapter 1.
- Life roles ranged from grandparents with post-college grandchildren, to first-time expecting parents, to step parents, to adoptive parents, to single parents, to those struggling with infertility issues, to traditional parents in a nuclear family.
- Religious upbringing ranged from deeply traditional people raised in the Churches of Christ, to less tradition-bound, self-proclaimed progressive members of the Churches of Christ, to Catholicism, to those who had no depth of religious background prior to joining Smyrna.
- All participants would be considered members in good standing, with the vast majority strongly involved in the ongoing life of the congregation.
- Leadership roles included elders, ministers, deacons, deaconesses (in function, not in title), Bible class teachers, and consistent volunteers. Within the group there were those

with direct participatory attachments to shepherding, education ministry, youth ministry, the Hispanic ministry, and the marriage ministry.

- Education levels ranged from participants with little or no post-high school training, to those with technical or trade school training, to participants with advanced degrees in theology, business, marriage and family counseling, and a variety of other fields.

APPENDIX E—DISCERNMENT SESSION OUTLINES

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 1

7:00-7:10—INTRODUCTION

- Participant introductions. Review of the purpose of this discernment group and the process for sessions to discern “A Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ.” This process as a part of my ACU work.
- Review of discernment principles
- Prayer for God to guide us in this process

7:10-7:30—GENESIS 1:1-2:3 STUDY

- Background on the Genesis text
 - Oral society
 - Ancient Near Eastern writing
 - The purpose of the text
- The importance of “order out of chaos”
- Patterns in the text
- What does it mean to be made “in the image of God”?

- What do we mean by “vocation” in relation to God and marriage? Vocation as a part of design and order

7:30-7:55—GENESIS 1:1-2:3 DISCUSSION

- Why did the Genesis writer give attention to design and order?
- When you hear 1:26-28, what do you notice? What catches your attention?
- What commission did God give to the man and the woman? What is the significance of it?
- Why did God “create them male and female”? What were the other possibilities? Why did God choose this route?
- In light of the Genesis 1:1-2:3 text, think about the holistic nature of vocation and the marriage relationship. How does the man and woman’s vocational identity relate to who they are “in the image of God”?
- What have we discussed in connection to this text that might be pertinent to our task of discerning a vocational theology of marriage?

7:55-8:00

Conclusion

Creation Account

(1:1-2) In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 1</u></p> <p>(1:3-5) "Let there be light"</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 4</u></p> <p>(1:14-19) "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the earth."</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 2</u></p> <p>(1:6-8) "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water." God called the expanse "sky."</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 5</u></p> <p>(1:20-23) "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth."</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 3</u></p> <p>(1:9-13) "Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear." "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds."</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 6</u></p> <p>(1:24-31) "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."</p>

	"I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food."
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Day 7</u></p> <p>(2:1-3) Thus the heavens and the earth were completed in all their vast array. By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.</p>	

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 2

7:00-7:10—RECAP AND INTRODUCTION

Review of last week's time together and questions from last week

Review of discernment principles

Prayer for God to guide us in this process

Review of our theology so far

7:10-7:50—GENESIS 2:4-2:25 STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Reading of the text

Notice the vocational call of the text (v. 5 “no man to work the ground,” v. 15 “put him in the garden to work it,” the need for a helper to help with what?)

What is meant by “vocational”?

The union of spiritual and physical

All of life is life in God, partnering with God

V. 9 introduces the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and v. 17 gives the prohibition. Why did God put that tree in the garden?

Why did God declare the loneliness of man to be “not good”?
 The significance of naming the animals prior to the creation of the woman

What does the word “helper” encompass?

Why did God take a rib?

Why woman?

Notice the man’s declaration about his mate in v. 23. What can we discern about his perception of his relationship to her? How does the narrator’s commentary in v. 24 add the man’s statement?

V. 25 is the key to understanding the man and woman relationally, both to each other and to God. What does it mean that they were “naked and not ashamed”?

What have we discussed in connection to this text that might be pertinent to our task of discerning a vocational theology of marriage?

7:55-8:00

Conclusion

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 3

7:00-7:10

Review of last week's time together and questions from last week

Prayer for God to guide us in this process

Review of our theology so far

7:10-7:50—GENESIS 3 STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Reading of the text

The word play in Genesis 2 and 3

“crafty” (3:1) and two different words for “naked” (2:25; 3:7)

Why did God put the tree in the garden and allow the possibility of the transgression?

Who is to blame for the transgression? (2:17; 3:2; Romans 5:12-14; 1 Tim. 2:9-15; 1 Cor. 11:2-16; et al.)

What does it mean “their eyes were opened”?

After sin, Adam and Eve reality is forever changed for Adam and Eve. What are the characteristics of the new “broken” reality?

The punishments and a marked shift in reality

From reality centered on God	To reality centered on self
From cooperation	To isolation
From participation in creation	To pain in childbearing
From “helper”	To subservient
From the work of caring for creation	To a curse on the ground

The naming of Eve as an act of dominion

The importance of clothing: reminder or redemption?

7:55-8:00

Conclusion

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 4

7:00-7:10

Review of last week's time together and questions from last week

Prayer for God to guide us in this process

Review of our theology so far

7:10-7:50—2 CORINTHIANS 5 STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Reading of the text

Discussion of original context

- Paul's response to false teachers who are maligning him
- Paul's proclamation of the resurrection life as a redemptive, vocational world view

Creation concepts in Paul's writing

Romans 5:12-19

1 Corinthians 15:45-49

14

Ephesians 5:21-33

1 Timothy 2:15

1 Corinthians 11:3-12

2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:13-

Colossians 1:15-17

Creation connections in this text

What is meant by "the ministry of reconciliation"?

7:55-8:00—Conclusion

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 5

7:00-7:10

Review of last week's time together and questions from last week

Prayer for God to guide us in this process

Review of our theology so far

7:10-7:50—2 CORINTHIANS 5 STUDY AND DISCUSSION

Reading of the text

Reminder of the original context

- Paul's response to false teachers who are maligning him
- Paul's proclamation of the resurrection life as a redemptive, vocational world view

Looking at the visual provided, does the foundation/ direction/ flow (or whatever word you would use) of this theological movement seem to make sense?

In looking at the 2 Corinthians 5 passage, what does Paul explicitly state as evidence of participation in the resurrection life?

What is implicitly stated?

How do we move the idea of our participation in the ministry of reconciliation from an individual pursuit to a pursuit in marriage?

How is participation in the ministry of reconciliation a means of reclaiming our vocational identity in marriage?

How do we move it from a pursuit of individual couples to a part of our congregational identity?

7:55-8:00—Conclusion

VOCATIONAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE DISCERNMENT GROUP

Session 6

7:00-7:10

Review of last week's time together and questions from last week

Prayer for God to guide us in this process

7:10-7:50

My thought process in adapting the draft, after much prayer and reflection, was:

- 1) To state where we are as a people and as a church as we understand it from scripture
- 2) To state what we believe God is calling us to be/ do/ become.

Considerations for the final work we present to the congregation:

If this is to be something that is truly significant to the congregation, it must be

- 1) Concise in language and presentation--no longer than one to two pages, but not so minimized that it fails to say something significant.
- 2) It must be readable (it doesn't need to contain theological language that is unclear or confusing).
- 3) It must be applicable to the diversity of our congregation (generational, ethnic, social, economic, etc.).
- 4) It needs to be focused--we are seeking God's call for couples in participation in his kingdom, not trying to answer every possible scenario or question about Christian marriage.

Potential questions to keep in mind as we discern together:

- 1) If I hadn't been in the sessions over the last several weeks, and I was handed this statement, what would it say to me as it is written?
- 2) What needs to be included, deleted, or otherwise refined to make it say something meaningful?
- 3) Long term, how will or should this statement inform how we teach and preach for the foreseeable future?
- 4) What are we saying that will be transmitted to future generations?
- 5) How will it ultimately affect other ministries (pre-marital counseling, True Love Waits, Bible classes, sermons, etc.)?

7:55-8:00—Conclusion

APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS

The purpose of the question sets was 1) to lead participants in continued reflection on the scripture discussed in a particular session, and 2) to keep the number of questions and phrasing of the questions simple enough that participants did not feel overwhelmed, resulting in short, non-reflective written answers that diminished participation.

Session 1—God’s design for marriage as a reflection of the divine relationship (Genesis 1:1-2:3)

1. Based on Genesis 1:1-2:3, what do you think God’s intent is for marriage?
2. What were Adam and Eve’s responsibilities to God?
3. What were Adam and Eve’s responsibilities to each other?
4. What do you see in this text about marriage as a reflection of the divine relationship that should be included in our theology of marriage?

Session 2—God’s design for marriage as kingdom vocation (Genesis 2:4-25)

1. Based on what we have studied in both this week and last week’s sessions, what specific tasks did God give to Adam and Eve?
2. Given the context of our discussion tonight, how would you define “vocation”?
3. What does it mean to you to say that marriage is “kingdom vocation”?
4. What do you see in this text about marriage as vocation that should be included in our theology of marriage?

Session 3—The brokenness of marriage due to living in a fallen world (Genesis 3)

1. How does living in a fallen world affect the relationship between spouses?
2. How does living in a fallen world affect a couple’s relationship with God?
3. Given your definition of “vocation” from last week, how does living in a fallen world affect marriage as Christian vocation?
4. How is God at work in marriage in a broken world?
5. What do you see in this text that should be included in our vocational theology of marriage?

Session 4—Understanding what the ministry of reconciliation is (2 Corinthians 5:11-21)

1. How would you describe the ministry of reconciliation to someone else?
2. What do you see God’s role to be in the ministry of reconciliation?
3. What do you see your role to be in the ministry of reconciliation?
4. What does the ministry of reconciliation have to do with marriage?
5. What do you see in this text that should be included in our vocational theology of marriage?

Session 5—How marriage, as participation in the ministry of reconciliation, is a means of reclaiming our marriage vocation (2 Corinthians 5)

1. Prior to this study, did you view this passage in a marriage context or in an individual context? Why?

2. Can a couple's participation in the ministry of reconciliation help them reclaim marriage as kingdom vocation? Explain your answer.
3. What are the larger implications for the congregation in couples participating in the ministry of reconciliation, and how do we move this from an isolated "couples' effort" to a part of our congregational identity?
4. What do you see in this text that should be included in our theology of marriage?

Session 6—Final Edit Review

1. Reflecting on your experience during the first five weeks, did this process change any beliefs or perceptions you had?
2. Is your perception of the theology of Christian marriage different now than before the sessions? If so, how?
3. Give your reflections on the final "God's Call for Married Couples at the Smyrna Church of Christ" document (or whatever title we decide upon).
4. Do you see this shaping our congregation? Explain your answer.
5. Will this theology shape or reshape your own marriage? Explain your answer.

Session 7—Review questions for the elders

1. Share your reflections on the "Vocational Theology of Marriage for the Smyrna Church of Christ" document.
2. What reflections did your wife bring that you might not have considered?
3. What reflections emerged in the elders meeting that you might not have considered?
4. What was your impression of the meeting with the discernment team?
5. Do you see this theology shaping us as a congregation? Explain your answer.
6. Do you see this theology shaping or reshaping your own marriage? Explain your answer.

APPENDIX G: SMYRNA'S VISION AND VALUES STATEMENTS

The following Vision and Values Statements were produced by the ministry team (elders and ministers) at Smyrna to serve as an ecclesiological framework for the congregation.

Overarching Vision:

- ***Vision:*** *Inspiring each other to glorify Christ by growing, reaching, and connecting (Eph. 2:22)*

How we desire to see this vision lived out at Smyrna:

- ***Growing in Worship:*** *Seeking to glorify Christ in praise that is spiritually refreshing, biblically dynamic, and uplifting (Psalm 100:2)*
- ***Growing in Study:*** *Every member is immersed in the transformative power of scripture on an ongoing basis (Psalm 119:105)*
- ***Growing in Holiness:*** *Through the Spirit's power we will seek to continually grow in holiness and spiritual maturity (1 Peter 1:15)*
- ***Connecting in Healthy Relationships:*** *Encouraging mentoring of individuals and families for development of healthy relationships (1 Cor 11:1)*
- ***Connecting in LIFE Groups:*** *Every member actively participating in a LIFE Group (Acts 2:44)*
- ***Connecting in Involvement:*** *Increasing relationships through on-going ministry involvement (1 Cor 3:9)*
- ***Reaching those Searching:*** *Encouraging and providing a way for members to share Christ with others (2 Cor 5:20)*
- ***Reaching the Broken-Hearted:*** *Being a hospital for the hurting; providing counseling, recovery, and serenity (Luke 5:31)*
- ***Reaching Our Community:*** *Members regularly engaging in acts of service that makes a difference in our community (John 13:15)*

APPENDIX H: FIRST DRAFT OF THE FINAL THEOLOGICAL STATEMENT

God's Call for Married Couples at the Smyrna Church of Christ

We believe that in the beginning God created humanity to be in relationship with Him. He created man and woman in His image. Husband and wife were created with a distinct purpose, to work together in God's kingdom, participating with God by caring for creation and procreating. At creation, humanity's existence was holistic. The physical life and the spiritual life were one together, and God was in their midst.

We recognize that humanity chose to rebel against God, and sin entered the world, breaking our spiritual and physical connection with God. With this came isolation, shame, fear, guilt, blame, loss of communication, and a host of other evils associated with a cursed existence. We also recognize that we are all heirs of sin, and we are all fallen people living in a fallen world. Sin has disrupted the marriage relationship and destroyed God's intent for husband and wife to partner together with God to work in His kingdom.

We rejoice that through the death and resurrection of our Lord Christ Jesus, God is calling us back to a restored relationship with Him. In Christ, God is calling us to participate in the Ministry of Reconciliation. Through this participation, married couples are called to lives of love, forgiveness, grace, healing, restoration, submission, and sacrificial living; first with each other, then within the congregation, and then toward the larger world of which they are a part. In Christ, couples participate in reclaiming the relationship with God established at creation, offer hope to others, and facilitate reconciling humanity back to God.

In marriage, the specifics of how a husband and wife participate in the Ministry of Reconciliation will differ from couple to couple, but we believe a couple's ongoing, joint participation is their intentional choice to please God and serve the cause of Christ.

APPENDIX I: FINALIZED VERSION OF THE THEOLOGY STATEMENT

God's Call for Husbands and Wives at the Smyrna Church of Christ

We believe that in the beginning God created humanity to be in relationship with Him. He created man and woman in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). Adam and Eve were created with a distinct purpose, to work together in God's kingdom, participating with God by caring for creation and procreating (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). At creation, humanity's existence was fully focused on God. The physical life and the spiritual life were one together, and God was in their midst (Gen. 1-2).

We recognize that we fail to live out God's intent for husband and wife to participate with God. Sin entered the world breaking our spiritual and physical connection with God. With this came isolation, shame, fear, guilt, blame, loss of communication, and brokenness. Sin disrupts the marriage relationship and God's intent for husband and wife to partner together with Him to work in His kingdom (Gen. 3).

We rejoice that through the death and resurrection of our Lord Christ Jesus, God is calling husbands and wives back to a restored relationship with Him (2 Cor. 5:21). In Christ, God is calling us to participate in the reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). Through this participation, married couples are called to seek holiness, living lives of love, forgiveness, grace, healing, restoration, submission, and sacrificial living; with each other, within the church family, and toward the larger world of which we are a part. In Christ, husbands and wives participate together in reclaiming the relationship God established at creation, offer hope to others, and seek to reconcile the world back to God.

In marriage, husband and wife are "one flesh" (Gen. 2:23-24), working together in God's kingdom and sharing a common unity and a common purpose (Gen. 2:18). While the specifics of how a husband and wife participate will differ from one couple to another, we believe a husband and wife's ongoing, joint participation is their intentional choice to please God and serve the cause of Christ (2 Cor. 5:15). We believe God is calling us as a church family to teach and live out this gospel of reconciliation as a path for husbands and wives to pursue together.

APPENDIX J: VISUAL FLOW CHART OF THE THEOLOGY STATEMENT



APPENDIX K: PLAN FOR INTRODUCING THE THEOLOGY STATEMENT TO THE CONGREGATION

The intent of this initiative is to focus the congregation on the marriage ministry and to call them to an understanding of marriage as a joint participation in God's kingdom. Rather than focus on one specific Sunday or series of Sundays, as later ministry initiatives will, the plan for this initiative is to keep the marriage ministry and the theology statement in front of the congregation from several directions for several months.

January 2—Congregation wide dinner to celebrate Nathan and Evelyn Graham's 65th Wedding Anniversary after p.m. service. 65th anniversaries are rare enough due to life expectancies, but even more so in our contemporary context. This momentous occasion in the Grahams' life stands as a milestone for the entire congregation. This event will be planned with the help of the Grahams' children who also attend at Smyrna.

January 30, February 6, 13—Introduce the "God's Call for Husbands and Wives at the Smyrna Church of Christ" statement to the congregation through sermons that go through Genesis 1-3 and 2 Corinthians 5. This series of three sermons is the "meat" of this initiative. The theology statement will be introduced as an identity statement applicable to the entire congregation, and connected into the overall Vision and Values framework of the church.

February 7-14—Emphasize National Marriage Week and use it as a means of spotlighting the existing ministry avenues of Smyrna's marriage ministry.

March 4-6—Marriage Retreat weekend at Fall Creek Falls. This event will allow couples to be processing and implementing the theology statement as active joint participation in the kingdom of God.

March 16—Kick off "True Love Waits" in the Student Ministry. Sexual abstinence prior to marriage will be placed into a more comprehensive framework of teaching about covenant, Christian marriage as joint participation in the Kingdom of God and the pursuit of holiness through marriage.

March 23-April 20—Reevaluate annual Wednesday Night Service Teams to provide better opportunities for husbands and wives to participate in Kingdom service together.

April 27—Congregation will be invited to a reception after the True Love Waits commitment ceremony (commitment ceremony will be during class time). This will give the church another opportunity to mentor and encourage others.

APPENDIX L: MARRIAGE MENTORING MINISTRY PROPOSAL

Purpose: The purpose of the Marriage Mentoring Ministry is to connect godly, experienced couples with younger couples (both pre-marriage and post-marriage) to model Christian marriage.

The ministry will function on two levels.

Level #1:

Mentoring couples will meet with mentees every month in a relaxed informal setting (preferably over a meal) and go through a series of conversations (one per meeting) to help younger/less experienced couples learn from the mentoring couple's joys as well as their mistakes. The conversations will include family of origin, expectations and roles in marriage, financial choices, spiritual life/faith/God's mission for your marriage, relating with in-laws, handling conflict, communication, and personality differences. All conversations will be done within a spiritual context as outlined by Smyrna's general theology of marriage statement in the Marriage Ministry brochure and the "God's Call for Husbands and Wives at the Smyrna Church of Christ" theology statement.

This will be available to engaged couples and married couples. This model is finite and ends after couples go through the conversations (although Lord willing the relationship aspect won't end after the monthly sessions). Level #1 is designed for strengthening and encouraging healthy marriages that may be facing normal "season of life"-related stresses. It is not designed for couples already in extreme marital crisis that requires professional counseling.

Level #2:

Although not technically a mentoring situation, the second level of this ministry will address a specific need in marriage. This segment of the ministry will concentrate on building a database of couples who have wrestled with specific issues who can then be paired with couples currently going through that issue (i.e.—death of a child, an affair, loss of a job, bankruptcy, depression, having to become the caregiver for an aging/dying parent, sudden or significant changes in health, abuse, parenting crises, etc.). While Level #2 does address extreme marital stresses that may also require professional help, the purpose of this ministry is to provide competent, empathetic congregational support for those who are hurting.

This relationship will endure as long as it is beneficial to the couples involved.

What the Mentoring Ministry is and is not:

1. The Mentoring Ministry is based on a Christian community/friendship model.
2. It is intended to fulfill the scriptural directive of the older more mature members of the community teaching the younger members in a spirit of love and godliness.
3. It is not intended to be professional counseling, and both couples involved should understand this. Mentoring couples must display the wisdom to know their limitations and refer the mentee couple to a professional counselor when necessary and not allow their involvement to be prolonged.
4. It is not a pretense that the mentoring couples are perfect in their own marriages.

Guidelines for mentoring couples:

Because we want to put forward marriage as a God-created, covenant relationship meant to have purpose and bring joy to the husband and wife, we must be careful in setting guidelines for participating couples. We don't want to put a young couple with a devitalized older couple that is simply enduring marriage. We want vibrant couples that enjoy marriage and being married (in spite of its challenges) as mentors. Because of this, the following guidelines should be observed by all participating mentor couples:

1. Above all else, a mentoring couple must be martially sound and spiritually motivated. They must see marriage not just as culture or preference, but as calling in the kingdom of God.
2. A mentoring couple must commit to going through a training/orientation session before being paired with other couples.
3. A mentoring couple should be thoroughly familiar with the church's general theology of marriage as stated in the Marriage Ministry brochure and with the "God's Call for Husbands and Wives at the Smyrna Church of Christ" theology statement.
4. Those desiring to be mentoring couples will be required to take the PREPARE/ENRICH marital inventory and must place in one of the top three levels (Vitalized, Harmonious, or Conventional). Couples that place as Conflicted or Devitalized need to address their own marriage matters first before seeking to help others.
5. Mentoring couples must recognize and adhere to a very strict confidentiality.
6. The husband and wife in a mentoring couple should carefully consider what they will share at each meeting and not, without prior knowledge and consent, share anything that would embarrass their mate or cast him/her in a bad light.
7. Although each couple will be considered on a case by case basis, ideally mentoring couples will have been married at least 12 years, and ideally 15 or more, and will have at least 10 years more marriage experience than the couples with which they are working.

8. Mentoring couples must be willing to do what is best for the mentee couple, even if that includes terminating the relationship and pairing the mentee couple with another mentor couple. This must be done with love and cannot be taken personally.